COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES
FOR CHRISTIAN WITNESS AMONG THE LOWLAND LAO
INFORMED BY WORLDVIEW THEMES IN *KHWAN* RITUALS

By

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A Dissertation Presented to the

Faculty of the School of World Mission

And Institute of Church Growth

FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Intercultural Studies

May 2002

ABSTRACT

Bailey, Stephen K.
2002 "Communication Strategies for Christian Witness Among the Lowland Lao Informed by Worldview Themes in *Khwan* Rituals." Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission. Ph.D. in Intercultural Studies. 441 pp.

Protestant missionaries have been communicating the gospel among lowland Lao people for more than one hundred years with discouraging results. This research was undertaken with the purpose of understanding Lao worldview in order to suggest more effective strategies of communication for Christian witness in Laos. The study of Lao worldview was approached through an analysis of *khwan* rituals. *Khwan* rituals are among the most important and commonly practiced Lao rituals.

In Part I the theoretical assumptions brought to the interpretation of *khwan* rituals and Lao worldview are explained. It pays special attention to the theory of hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. Relevance theory is used alongside of Ricoeur's hermeneutics to help explain how meaning is constructed in communication.

Part II analyzes the social context of Lao society and considers the field data on *khwan* rituals using a structural approach. Following Ricoeur, my interpretation of these rituals moves past the structural viewpoint to a more historically situated interpretation.

Part III presents a description of Lao worldview themes making extensive use of Mary Douglas' grid and group theory. I suggest that the structure of Lao society reflects a hierarchical cosmology. The strategies for communicating the gospel among the Lao are

intended to flow within Lao society's high group and high grid social dynamics. I suggest that by communicating within these social dynamics, Lao people will better understand the intention of the gospel. I understand the intention of the gospel is to bring people into covenant relationships with God and others. This intention directly addresses the Lao concern for social relationships. Christians must communicate the intention of the gospel by engaging Lao people in covenant relationships that look to the cross and the kingdom of God in order for Christ to be incarnated in Laos.

Mentor: R. Daniel Shaw   291 words

Dedication

To my wife

Jacqui

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN   Association of South East Asian Naitons

C&MA   Christian and Missionary Alliance

FEBC   Far East Broadcasting Company

LAO PDR   Lao People's Democratic Republic

LEC   Lao Evangelical Church

LPRP   Lao People's Revolutionary Party

LWU   Lao Women's Union

MAF   Missionary Aviation Fellowship

MCC   Mennonite Central Committee

OMF   Overseas Missionary Fellowship

CHARACTER CHART:

TRANSLITERATION OF LAO CHARACTERS
(Adapted from Raendchen 2000:5-7)

Lao Consonants	Roman Convention	Lao Consonants	Roman Convention	Lao Vowels	Roman Convention	Lao Vowels	Roman Convention
¡	k	´	m	x½	a	Àxñ¨	ia
¢	kh	µ	y	x¾-	aa	Àxô°	üa
£	kh	ë	r	xò	i	Àxõ°	üa
¤	ng	ì	l	xó	ii	xö°½	ua
¥	ch	¸	v	xb	ü	xö°	ua
¦	s	¹	h	xõ	üü	Äx	ay
-§	s	¹¤	ng	x÷	u	Ãx	ay
¨	ny	¹¨	ny	xØ	uu	Àxö¾	ao
©	d	Î	n	Àx½	ā	x¿	am
ª	t	Ï-	m	Àx	āā	x¾¨	ay
«	th	Í	l	Áx½	ä	x¾°	ao
ê	th	¹¸	v	Áx	ää	x°x	aw
-	n	º		Âx½	o	xñx	a
®	b	»	h	Âx	oo	Àxñx	ā
-̄	p			Àx¾½	aw	xöx	o
º	ph			xð	aw	x¼x	ia
±	f			Àxò	üe	x¸x	ua
²	ph			Àxó	üe		
³	f			Àxñ¨½	ia		

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MAP OF LAOS AND REGION
(Source: Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection 2002)

PART I

FOUNDATIONAL ISSUES

This dissertation presents strategies for communicating the gospel among the lowland Lao in light of their worldview. In order to achieve an adequate description of the Lao worldview, I analyze and interpret a particular type of Lao ritual that calls a person's life spirit or *khwan*. Part I introduces the direction and theoretical assumptions that guided my research. The intentions and methodology for my research are explained in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 summarizes the theories for cultural interpretation used in the analysis of *khwan* rituals. In Chapter 3, I review the theories that shaped the communication strategies presented in the final chapter of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It has been more than forty-five years since William Smalley, former missionary to Laos, anthropologist and linguist, wrote the following words in *Practical Anthropology*:

> Apparently the gospel has never been made to seem relevant to the Lao. I feel deeply that a careful study should be made of the communication of the gospel in relation to the Lao culture . . . How can the Good News be made to seem good--to be something that people will really want--in this culture which does not, on the whole, see other needs than those met by its normal experience? Here the problem is not primarily one of language mastery. The missionaries are not worse than the average, and some are much better than the average. . . . The communication problems here are cultural ones (1956:56-57).

Today the response of the lowland Lao to the gospel is not very different than it was then. This dissertation takes up the challenge of addressing the communication problems that Smalley raised.

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR, or Laos)[1] is one of the least understood or noticed nations in the international community. It has no seaport, its geo-political role has been to serve as a buffer state between giants such as China, Vietnam, Thailand, and the quality of life of its population is one of the lowest in the world. Perhaps the only claim to fame in this day of increased foreign tourism is the highly

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[1] "Laos" is pronounced "Lao" by native speakers. The final "s" is not pronounced. The term "Laotian" has been falling out of usage in the literature in favor of the term "Lao." It might also be helpful to know that Vientiane is pronounced "Viang Chan."

preserved traditional culture that an increasing number of postmodern urbanites from around the world come to experience.

Among those who have traveled to Laos or have had the privilege to live there as a foreign guest, few have escaped falling in love with the ready hospitality of the people. The Lao themselves recognize that hospitality is one of their cultural strong points and they refer to it with the phrase *nam chay*.[2] They value a relaxed and even-tempered attitude toward life that they refer to with the phrase *chay yān*, "cool heart." They love *muan*, "to have a good time" and are quick to forgive offenses with the phrase *baw pān yang*, "it was nothing." This unflappable style has served the Lao well during centuries of war and cyclical poverty. Many foreign powers have occupied Laos, but few have been able to effect significant change on Lao society. Christian missionary efforts to influence Lao society have not faired much better than have the efforts of foreign political powers.

A Jesuit named Jean de Leria attempted the first Christian mission to Laos in 1642. He stayed for five years before pressure from Buddhist monks forced him to leave (Roffe 1975). In 1771, a Vietnamese catechist brought the gospel to the city of Thakaek, which has historically had a large Vietnamese population (Latourette 1939:295-297). Later, in 1878, Catholic fathers tried again in northeastern Laos, but the mission came to a tragic end with the martyrdom of twelve priests in 1884 and five more in 1889 (Roffe 1975). The most successful Catholic efforts occurred later in southern Laos.

The first Protestant missionary to Laos was Presbyterian Daniel McGilvary, who made several trips to northern Laos between 1872 and 1898 from Chiang Mai, Thailand

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[2] There is no English equivalent for the word *nam chai*. Kerr defines it as "spirit, will, agreement" (1972:692).

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(Andrianoff 1991). In 1902, Gabriel Contesse and Maurice Willy began the work of the Swiss Brethren in southern Laos (Andrianoff 2002). Later, in the early 1950s, Christian Mission in Many Lands and the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) entered southern Laos to work in cooperation with the Swiss (Oppel 1984).[3] The first Protestant resident missionary in northern Laos, G. Edward Roffe, was sent by the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) in 1930. In the 1960s small contingents from Missionary Aviation Fellowship (MAF), the Southern Baptists, World Vision, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), the Far Eastern Broadcast Company (FEBC), and Asian Christian Service arrived (Oppel 1984).[4]

Just before the communist takeover, all foreign missionaries left Laos. The exception was MCC, which was the only Western mission that continued its presence into post-liberation Laos. MCC continues to do community development projects in the Lao PDR today.[5] At the time of the so-called "liberation," both the northern and southern churches were self-governing and had worked together cooperatively for many years. The total number of Protestant Christians in the south was about 2,000 (Oppel 1984) and in the north the number was about 7,000 (C&MA 1973).[6] The ethnic makeup of the church was roughly 65 percent highland (Hmong in the north), 20 percent midland Lao (mostly Khmu in the north) and 15 percent lowland Lao (who were mostly in the south).

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[3] Some Christian Brethren missionaries began work in southern Laos in 1951 (Andrianoff 2001). OMF began in 1954.

[4] MAF and FEBC staff worked under the Christian and Missionary Alliance (Andrianoff 2002).

[5] MCC entered Laos in early 1975. Because of the political situation, they were asked by church leaders in August not to attend the LEC worship services. They did maintain a loose communication with the LEC during that time and continue good relationships with them today.

[6] This figure, from the *Annual Report* of the C&MA in 1973, reflects statistics reported by missionaries on the church in Laos from 1972. It is the last report provided by the C&MA mission in Laos.

The Protestant Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) was formed in the 1950s. It was a merger between the northern Protestant churches planted by C&MA missionaries, and the southern Protestant churches planted by missionaries under the Swiss Mission Évangélique, the OMF, and the American Brethren. Today the LEC reports more than 40,000 members, but these numbers are difficult to verify since travel and communication between many provinces remains difficult. More than half of the LEC is made up of Khmu people (midland Lao). Roughly another 35 percent of the church is Hmong (upland Lao). Beyond the LEC there are a few small Protestant church gatherings not associated with the LEC, such as the Seventh Day Adventist Church, one church associated with a Lutheran mission, some small gatherings associated with Campus Crusade for Christ, and several groups that connect themselves to independent Asian missionaries.

Some property belonging to the Catholic community, mostly in the form of schools, was confiscated by the communist government after it took control in 1975. After 1990 some Catholic churches were refurbished, and a new education and training home for village girls opened in Vientiane Municipality.[7] As of 1995 the Catholic Church was organized into four Vicariates, overseen by three bishops. There were sixteen other ordained priests, seven of whom were ordained after 1975. Government pressure on the church, however, continues to hamper many Catholic efforts. There are roughly 35,000 Catholics, with the largest group in the church being midland Lao, followed in number by the lowland Lao.

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[7] Vientiane Municipality is the capital of the Lao PDR and has a population today of about 524,000 persons (Institute for Cultural Research 1999:25).

After more than one hundred years of missionary witness among lowland Lao people, it is unlikely that there are more than 3,000 Lao believers in the Lao PDR. This translates into 0.13 percent of the lowland population in Laos. With the exception, perhaps, of Savannakhet Lao, Christians have made little impact, if any, on the larger Lao society. In many cases there simply has been no opportunity for the majority of Lao to hear the gospel, and even when they have heard the gospel, very few Lao convert. Even more telling is the seeming inability of the Lao Christians themselves to reverse this situation. One of the fundamental conclusions of this paper is that Christianity should be communicated within the structure of the Lao social system. The fact that the gospel has not traveled far within Lao society should not surprise us, since from the beginning, Christians have been taught to move out of the ritual system that serves to empower and define the borders of Lao identity and society.

The research for this dissertation was carried out in order to understand how to communicate cross-culturally with Lao people in a more effective way. The research seeks a better understanding of the worldview of Lao people by asking them about a ritual they perform at every significant occasion in their lives. They call this ritual *suukhwan* "the calling of the *khwan* spirit" or *baasii*. This ritual speaks to Lao identity and reveals deep underlying Lao worldview themes. Once these Lao worldview themes have been identified, the task turns to using them to inform strategies for communicating the gospel in ways that will allow Lao people to encounter Jesus.

The complexity of communicating well with Lao people was a task I struggled with every day during the sixteen years that I was privileged to work and live with the Lao in Thailand and the Lao PDR. My efforts in Christian witness there were part of a

long line of Protestant efforts to communicate the gospel to the Lao that began at the end of the nineteenth century.

This dissertation is my contribution to helping overcome some of the communication problems that strain relationships in day-to-day living between expatriates and the Lao, and keep the Lao from encountering God in Jesus Christ. As an interdisciplinary study, the dissertation brings cultural and social anthropology, hermeneutics, communications, and theology into conversation. Without question this study is heavily weighted in its cultural and social analysis of Lao culture, but communication theory and hermeneutics also play important roles.

Intentions for This Dissertation

This section explains the central intentions of the dissertation. The purpose and objectives speak to the intended outcomes of the research. The problem statement and research questions guide the research process that lead to these outcomes.

Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation is to develop communication strategies for Christian witness among lowland Lao people in the Lao PDR. This will be carried out through a worldview analysis of Lao *khwan* rituals.

Objectives

There are four intended outcomes to this dissertation. These objectives work together to build a basis for the communication strategies developed in Chapter 8. The objectives are as follows:

1. An incarnational model for cross-cultural communication (Chapter 3).

2. A description of key Lao worldview themes that are discernible in the performance of Lao *khwan* rituals (Chapter 6).

3. A description of how Lao worldview themes are being impacted by the influences of globalization (Chapter 6).

4. Two illustrations of how Lao worldview themes might impact and be impacted by biblical narratives (Chapter 7).

Problem Statement

The central question that this dissertation seeks to answer is, "What worldview themes are revealed in *khwan* rituals that can inform strategies for communicating the gospel to lowland Lao people in the Lao PDR?"

Research Questions

There are four questions that guide the research in this dissertation toward the intended outcomes. They are as follows:

1. Which model of cross-cultural communication is best suited for communicating the gospel among lowland Lao people in the Lao PDR today? Chapter 3

explores answers to this question by considering the process of the interpretation of meaning in cross-cultural communication.

2. What Lao worldview themes are revealed in *khwan* rituals? Using the review of the literature in Chapter 4 and the field data reported in Chapter 5, the second research question is answered in Chapter 6.

a. Which traditional worldview themes are seen in *khwan* rituals?

b. How do these worldview themes shape and reflect Lao social relations?

3. How are the Lao worldview themes revealed in *khwan* rituals impacted by social change? This question is addressed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

4. How might Lao worldview themes in *khwan* rituals impact a Lao reading of the biblical narrative? Chapter 7 answers this question by suggesting how the interpretation of the biblical narrative would look, given Lao worldview themes.

Definitions

Lowland Lao: From a Lao perspective the many different cultural-linguistic groups of Laos are divided into three broad categories: lowland Lao (*Lao Lum*), midland Lao (*Lao Kang* or *Lao Theung*), and highland Lao (*Lao Sung*). The Lao people I am writing about are the lowland Lao people who live in the Lao PDR.

Today Lao speaking people make up about 65 percent of the population of almost 5.3 million in the Lao PDR, and dominate the social and political environment. Grant Evans has argued that, historically speaking, Lao culture and society can not be limited to the boundaries of the modern state of the Lao PDR, since more than 20 million Lao speaking people live in northeast Thailand alone (Evans 1999). But a national identity in

the Lao PDR is being formed, and its primary orientation is the dominant Lao culture. This reality impacts the lives of the non-Lao-speaking peoples in Laos.[8] The category of Lao in the Lao PDR can be broken down further into those Lao who are oriented toward Sino-Vietnamese culture (e.g. the *Tai Dam* people) and those oriented toward Theravada Buddhism and Brahman ritual. This study is concerned with the latter group of Lao.

From an outsider's point of view, the Lao are linguistically part of the *Tai-Kadai*[9] language family found in southern China, northwestern Vietnam, Burma, northeast India, Thailand, and the Lao PDR (Diller 1998). Some of the common characteristics found among *Tai* speaking people are wet-rice agriculture, domestication of cattle and buffalo, the propitiation of nature and ancestor spirits (*phii*), political organization in the form of *müang*, "an hereditary aristocratic elite" that rules over "a free peasantry," and the belief in *khwan*, "soul essence" (Stuart-Fox 1998:22; Nathalang 1997:57).

Khwan rituals: The belief in *khwan* can be found among all *Tai* peoples, and in the Lao PDR *khwan* rituals are "the Lao ceremony *par excellence*" (Abhay 1959:128; cf. Evans 1998:82; Zago 1972:129). For the Lao, the relationship between the body and the spirit is closely integrated. During a person's life his or her life-spirit (or *khwan*) may become weak, flee in fright to another place, or be seduced into leaving the body. When

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[8] The number of indigenous groups in the Lao PDR is hard to pinpoint. Estimates range from 68 to 130 (see Chazee 1995 and Chamberlain, Alton, and Crisfield 1995). It should be kept in mind that to say that 65 percent of the people in Laos are Lao speaking is to include all of the groups who speak *Tai* (see footnote 9 below) languages. Some of these groups are not Buddhist. Evans discusses whether or not these groups should be included in the category of "Lao" (1999:1-34).

[9] *Tai-Kadai* or *Tai* refers to a language family that seems to have its roots in southern China (Edmonson 1998:1). The word Thai refers to the people who live in Thailand and speak a language (Thai) that is part of the larger *Tai* language group found in northwestern Vietnam, Burma, northeast India, Thailand, and the Lao PDR

this happens a Lao person may experience poor health, depression, a lack of courage, or bad luck. *Khwan* rituals are held to strengthen and call back a person's *khwan*.

Strategies for communicating the gospel: In using this term I mean two things: first, communication of the gospel that allows the meaning of the gospel to be "incarnated" in the worldview of the audience. It is important to note from the start that the findings of this study attempt to build on and move beyond contextualization theory with help from the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and the communication theory of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (see Chapter 3 of this dissertation). The strategies will be less concerned with communicating the cognitive information of the gospel (as important as that is) than with communicating the relational aspects of an encounter with God in Christ. Second, I seek to develop communication that uses local strategies for communicating the intention of the speaker to the audience. Such communication strategy will be developed in relation to Lao social structure.

Incarnation: Throughout this paper a central concern will be how the gospel can be incarnated into each human social context. I use the word "incarnated" deliberately to avoid using the word "contextualization" that, as I will show in Chapter 3, seems to imply safeguarding the meaning in one context (usually a Western one) within another one, in some equivalent or dynamically equivalent way. That being the case it is important to define my understanding of the gospel.

Gospel: I understand the gospel to be found in the life, death, resurrection, and person of Jesus Christ as recorded within the narrative of the Christian Bible. Not everything in the Bible is gospel but I believe that everything in the Bible points to this gospel and that everything in the Bible should be interpreted in terms of the gospel.

<u>Delimitations</u>

There are five points that serve as boundaries for my research. First, my intention in researching *khwan* rituals is to explore them for worldview themes. It is not my purpose to present an exhaustive description of the many varieties of *khwan* rituals. An exhaustive study would require investigation into the many regional and ethnic variations of meaning attributed to these rituals. Instead, I have focused my interpretation on lowland Lao *khwan* rituals as described by Lao people living in Vientiane Municipality.

The Lao PDR is a country that is struggling to build a sense of nationalism, while there still remains a keen sense of regionalism. As will be shown in the review of its history below, Laos was divided into regional kingdoms for much of its history. This regionalism can be seen in the different ways that the Lao language is spoken from one province to another. In the same way, there are variances in both the performance and meaning of *khwan* rituals from one part of the country to another.

Vientiane Municipality's population is filled with Lao people from every region in the nation. People both adapt some of their regional particularities to the Vientiane Lao culture and stubbornly hold on to some regional preferences. Certain neighborhoods (known as villages) in the municipality are populated with people from a single province, allowing for the preservation of some of their traditional cultural practices.[10]

Many of the Vientiane Lao that supplied their interpretations of *khwan* rituals were born outside the municipality and maintain more traditional views of life. This

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[10] For instance, Baan Phontong Village is located on the northwest side of the city and is populated mostly by people who originated in Hua Phan Province. Baan Sisangvone is located in the heart of the city near That Luang shrine and is populated primarily by people from Savannakhet.

certainly colors my study. There are differences in the understanding of *khwan* rituals between the Lao who have lived for significant periods of time in Vientiane Municipality and Lao who have spent very limited periods of time living in the municipality. Nevertheless, the differences between rural Lao and those impacted by the more urban life of Vientiane Municipality are not great,[11] a fact which is most likely due to the relatively low level of urbanization and secularization in the municipality and to the fact that many of the Lao who live in the municipality maintain strong ties with relatives who live in the provinces.

My field research data on *khwan* rituals reflects the diversity in Vientiane. From time to time the data revealed unique regional characteristics in the meaning of *khwan*. In spite of this I have attempted to focus on an interpretation of *khwan* rituals that I believe all Lao people would generally find relevant. Certain aspects of the interpretation may be more or less relevant to Lao from different parts of the country. In the end, I believe the interpretation is most relevant to the context of Lao people in the Municipality of Vientiane. This interpretation takes into account the general and traditional meaning of *khwan* in light of social change going on in the municipality. Clearly a more thorough investigation of *khwan* rituals would be needed to sort out its regional meanings.

Second, it is not my intention to come to conclusions as to whether or not *khwan* rituals should be practiced in Lao Christian churches. This issue has been a cause of some controversy between Protestant LEC leaders, Catholics, and missionaries seeking to

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[11] See footnote 6 in Chapter 5 on page 201.

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communicate the gospel in more contextual ways.[12] But the controversy is not without importance, since it suggests that *khwan* rituals may lie on one of the boundaries of Lao identity.[13] As Mary Douglas has argued in her book *Purity and Danger* (1966), the symbols and rituals used in a society to build a sense of group boundaries are often guarded with warnings of danger and taboo.

The questions, "Can Lao people be Lao and not practice *khwan* rituals?" and "Can a Christian practice *khwan* rituals and be a real Christian?" are at the heart of this controversy. Western Protestant missionaries in the south and north instructed Lao converts that they should not participate in *khwan* rituals. However, in the traditional Lao view (as I will demonstrate in Chapter 5), the *khwan* spirit is an essential part of what makes a human being human! As a result, Lao converts to Christianity must often choose between a Lao identity and a new identity constructed by foreign missionaries (both Asian and Western). There has been a silence on the subject of *khwan* among Lao Protestant Christian leaders. While these leaders regularly instruct Christians not to participate in the calling of the *khwan* spirit ritual, the same leaders have little or nothing to say about *khwan* itself. At the same time the large majority of Lao people--Christian and non-Christian--believe in *khwan*. And why wouldn't they? *Khwan* is of the essence of human life. It is the vital life spirit of a human being.

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[12] The forerunner in this effort was Evangelical Covenant missionary, Jim Gustafson, who planted a Church in northeast Thailand among ethnic Lao that contextualized *khwan* rituals for their worship services. The Institute for Applied Church Ministry that is associated with this church is located in Udorn, Thailand, and holds seminars showing Christians how *khwan* rituals can be used in the church.

[13] Things that stand on the boundary line of classification in a society are dealt with as dangerous or even taboo. Douglas writes, "The idea of society is a powerful image. It is potent in its own right to control or to stir men to action. This image has form; it has external boundaries, margins, internal structure. Its outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack. There is energy in its margins and unstructured areas" (1966:115).

The strong feelings that surround *khwan* rituals point to their importance in Lao society and culture, and this suggested to me that the rituals would be a good place to start in a study of Lao worldview themes. Nevertheless, this dissertation is not an attempt to deal directly with the controversy. Its purpose rather is to study *khwan* rituals in order to understand the worldview of Lao people and to allow this worldview to instruct strategies of communicating the gospel to Lao people.

Third, I approach the analysis of Lao worldview through the window of non-Buddhist *khwan* ritual. While I am convinced that these rituals may say more about Lao worldview than other Lao rituals, I am aware that my study may leave the picture of Lao religion somewhat incomplete because I focus on the level of folk religion that *khwan* rituals are a part of, and interpret Lao Buddhism from the vantage point of folk concerns for ancestors. Some Buddhist scholars may take issue with this. Certainly a complete study of Lao religion would need to address Buddhist philosophy more thoroughly than I have done. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the folk level of Lao religion is more crucial to an understanding of the Lao worldview than is classical Buddhist philosophy.

Fourth, this dissertation is focused on Christian witness. This means that my motivations are missiological in nature. I want to know how to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ effectively and relevantly to lowland Lao people in the Lao PDR. It is not my intention to suggest contextual theology for the Lao church itself though there may be implications from my study that Lao Christians will want to consider in doing a local theology.

Fifth, the consideration of biblical themes is intended to illustrate how Lao worldview themes might be fused with the horizon of the biblical narrative. In providing

these two examples I am looking at how the Lao worldview impacts, and is impacted by, the gospel. The two biblical narratives used were chosen because they address the internal order of social relationships (grid) and the boundaries of belonging in the Christian church (group). These two social dimensions, borrowed from Douglas, are key to my analysis of Lao worldview themes.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study is the fact that I was not able to study all the regional differences of *khwan* meaning in the Lao PDR. I have traveled a good deal in northern Laos and observed and participated in many *khwan* rituals there. My experience in southern Laos has been limited to a few trips and interaction with southerners in the city of Vientiane. There is no question that regional differences in performance and meaning do exist, but I do not believe that they are significant enough to invalidate the findings of this study. Furthermore, while I believe the findings have significant implications for missions among lowland Lao everywhere in Laos, they are perhaps most significant for communicating with the Lao in Vientiane Municipality.

Second, I am an outsider to Lao culture. I learned the symbolic structure used to communicate meaning in Lao culture over a period of sixteen years of living and working with Lao and northeast Thai people.[14] I cannot claim to know this culture the way Lao people know it and experience it. My knowledge of Lao culture is clearly limited to the

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[14] Working under CAMA Services Inc., the relief and development arm of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, I lived in northeast Thailand (an ethnically Lao area) where I worked in Lao refugee camps from 1981 to 1982 and then again from 1985 to 1989. I lived in Vientiane, Lao PDR from 1990 to 1996 and then from 1997 to 2001. I was in the US for one year during the 1996-1997 school year.

experiences I had in Lao society. Furthermore, this knowledge is significantly impacted by my own worldview. The role of outsider does, however, provide me with a perspective on Lao culture that would be difficult for a Lao person to achieve. Worldview themes of one's own culture are usually very difficult to identify and articulate (Kraft 1996:55-56). Worldview themes can rarely be critiqued by insiders because they are experienced as facts of life or as Douglas says, "natural symbols" (1970).

Third, the multi-disciplinary nature of this dissertation is a strength and a weakness, requiring study in the theory of anthropology, hermeneutics, contextualization, and communication. Nevertheless, bringing my findings in these four theoretical fields together did result in some creative insights that I will communicate in the conclusions of this dissertation. Perhaps the most fruitful aspects of the conclusions came from the interrelatedness of Lao symbolism, the hermeneutics of Ricoeur, and the grid and group theory of Douglas.

The weaknesses are most apparent in my command of the literature in Southeast Asian studies. For instance, most of what I have to say about Lao worldview has been identified before in some fashion by Thai and Lao scholars. My analysis may be somewhat unique in that I use *khwan* as a lens through which to identify worldview themes and analyze them in terms of the Douglas grid and group theory. More thorough research into Lao culture would have been done if my purpose had been strictly anthropological. My weaknesses in the literature are perhaps made up for, to some extent, by my extended experience working and living among Lao people. This period of time far exceeded the time most anthropologists give to their fieldwork.

Fourth, to some degree the political situation in the Lao PDR restricted the data collection on *khwan* rituals. In particular, the questionnaire I used was restricted in size and was done informally through Lao friends and their household relations. Surveys can only be done under the supervision of a government department. I chose not to work through such a department for fear that they would want to see the final product of my research, which might have been dangerous for the Christian community in Laos.

Assumptions

First, I am a committed Christian. For me this means that I have committed my life to the person and teaching (the gospel of the kingdom of God) of Jesus Christ. That is to say that I have given my allegiance to Christ, and that the cross of Christ and his kingdom are the hermeneutical poles between which I interpret experience. Finally, as Charles H. Kraft phrases it, this means that I face the threat of death, evil, and suffering with the power of His living presence in my life and in his church (1999).

Second, the gospel is grounded in the person of Jesus Christ, the biblical narrative, and the church. This gospel tradition makes claims on us, is made powerful, and is revealed as truth when Christ encounters us incarnationally in our local context.

As a person whom God sought out to become one of his people while I was spiritually and ethically lost, I am committed to participating in the mission of God in the world. I believe that this mission of seeking out lost men and women is at the heart of the Christian church. I am in agreement with Charles E. Van Engen who defines mission in the following way:

> Missions is the people of God intentionally crossing barriers, from church to nonchurch, faith to nonfaith, to proclaim by word and deed the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ; this task is achieved by means of the church's participation in God's mission of reconciling people to God, to themselves, to each other, and to the world, and gathering them into the church through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit with a view to the transformation of the world as a sign of the coming of the kingdom in Jesus Christ (1996:26-27).

While I believe that the missionary task of proclaiming the gospel to all peoples is a necessary and valid one, I also hold that the means of communicating this gospel must be in keeping with the teaching of Christ to treat others as they would want to be treated. To do otherwise undermines the message of the gospel itself. In other words, the means of doing mission must be in keeping with the ethic of the kingdom of God.

Finally, I offer a word on my epistemological assumptions. Many Christians continue to wrestle with the issues raised by the Enlightenment's critique on religious faith. The primary weapon for this has been the quest to establish Christian absolutes (Schaeffer 1976). In missions, this has been pursued through the concept of supracultural truth (e.g., Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989:172-174) and the belief in a biblical worldview (e.g., Burnett 1990:207-219). Behind these assertions is a concept of revelation that assumes that we have access to revelation that is free from the biases of personality and culture. Taking a different vantage point, an increasing number of Christians are concluding that we cannot access truth outside of the influence of our biases (cf. Hoedemaker 1999 and Van Gelder 1996). Even so, this conclusion is often embraced reluctantly.

The work of Paul G. Hiebert, a giant in the field of missions, is a good example of this struggle. He argues for "critical realism" and suggests that we cannot know things with absolute objectivity (1994:30). On the other hand, he calls us to critique culture from

a biblical worldview. But this of course raises the question "What is a biblical worldview?" Hiebert makes some suggestions about what would be included in such a worldview but goes no further. One can only assume that he is himself unsure about defining a biblical worldview. This problem has plagued the church since the issue first arose in the Book of Acts in regard to the Gentile mission (Ac. 15).

Like it or not, the Western world now stands with both feet in the postmodern world. While it feels like a unique experience to us, in some regards it has been the experience of Asia for thousands of years. While postmodernism has been defined in many ways, it is arguable that at its heart is a deep realization that there is no objective starting point. Subjectivity in terms of social relationships and ideology colors all knowledge and experience. The three so-called "masters of suspicion" led the way for this realization in the nineteenth century. Nietzsche revealed for the modern, Western world the fundamental quest for power that lies behind human beliefs and actions. Sigmund Freud showed us the powerful influence of the subconscious on our behavior. Karl Marx then exposed the veiled economic interests that lie behind many human decisions and dogmas. Is there no ground from which knowledge can be constructed that would not fall victim to human ideology? Western society has not yet recovered from the postmodern critique of idealistic knowledge (deconstructionism).

One author who has attempted to take seriously the critique of ideology and still find a place for knowledge that can be trusted is Ricoeur. As I will show in more detail in Chapter 3, Ricoeur manages to anchor epistemology in a teleology of hope. This hope is derived from an indirect knowledge of the self through language that acknowledges the other as equally fundamental as the self. He does this by taking tradition seriously,

allowing the structure of the narrative of tradition to critique our ideology while metaphorically opening up new horizons of possibility before us.

Ricoeur's approach is fundamentally interpretive and incarnational. It is possible for a Christian to understand this as resulting in truth established by the incarnation of the Jesus Christ in our midst. His incarnation in each context brings with it the advent of his kingdom and a restructuring of our horizons. We are left not with absolutes that are globally applicable, but with a trustworthy testimony of God's will for us here, today. In the encounter with the incarnated Christ we, like Mary (Jn. 20:17), may not grasp the risen Lord, but we can take a stand in faith. This testimony is validated and given authority by the local community. Nevertheless, it is a testimony that is open to revision and critique in dialogue with the worldwide church. So, what is absolutely true all the time? Jesus is. We know the truth because truth comes into our culture and time in Jesus, not because we have direct revelations from God that escape the tarnish of this world.

Target Audience

This dissertation is written for the faculty of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Ph.D. in Intercultural Studies. But I have in mind three additional audiences.

First, I am writing for the expatriate Christians who are trying to communicate the gospel to Lao people in the Lao PDR. It is my desire that this dissertation will provide useful communication strategies for them to use in Christian witness.

Second, I have in mind the Lao Christians who are actively sharing their faith with other Lao people in the Lao PDR. It might seem that they would not require the

insights offered in this paper. But given the exportation of so many Western models of communicating the gospel around the world, this paper may be useful to them in sorting out which models will fit their context better than others. Ideally, it would spur them on to creating their own communicational models for their unique context.

A third audience in the back of my mind is those Christian missionaries who are struggling to communicate the gospel in Asian societies structured in similar ways to Lao society. For them, the specific way that the Lao structure their cultural symbols will only be of passing interest. But the social structure reflected in the Lao symbol system may have a great deal in common with other societies. I trust that they will be able to use this paper as a model from which to work out the relationship between the symbol system and the social structure of the people in their own mission context and that this will aid their communication of the gospel.

Methodology

In this section, the methodology is explained in three ways. First, I report on the chronological steps taken in the research process. Second, I explain the tools used to gather field data on the performance and meaning of *khwan* rituals in Lao society. Third, I explain the structure of this paper and introduce in summary form my arguments for the communication strategies presented in the final chapter.

Chronology of the Research Process

My research was conducted at the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California. It consisted of six independent studies (tutorials) done

under the guidance of three tutors, two methods courses, and the writing of this dissertation.[15] The tutorial subjects, corresponding mentors, and the dates they were completed are listed below in Table 1.

TABLE 1

CHRONOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

No.	Tutorial/Methods Subject	Tutor
A	Methods: Theology of Mission	Charles E. Van Engen
1 & 2	Worldview Theory for Analysis of Lao Culture	Charles H. Kraft
B	Methods: Observing & Interpreting Culture	R. Daniel Shaw
3	Worldview Themes in *Khwan* Rituals (Field Research)	R. Daniel Shaw
4 & 5	Paul Ricoeur and Contextualization	Tite Tiénou
6	Contextual Communication Strategies For Lowland Lao	R. Daniel Shaw
	Dissertation (Outside Reader: Gintota P. V. Somaratna)	R. Daniel Shaw

The research method, which is depicted as a flow chart in Figure 1, began with a review of the literature related to the historical development of worldview theory.[16] This review was followed by a study of the social and cultural anthropological literature on the Lao, in a preliminary attempt to identity Lao worldview themes. This provided a context within which to study *khwan* rituals.

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[15] R. Daniel Shaw and Charles H. Kraft are professors of missiology at Fuller Theological Seminary. Tite Tiénou is professor of missiology at Trinity Evangelical Seminary.

[16] In Figure 1 the letters A, B, C, and D, correspond to the four research objectives described earlier. The box at the bottom labeled "Strategies for Communication of the Gospel to Lao People" represents the ultimate purpose of my dissertation. The numbered items correspond to the research questions delineated on the preceding pages.

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│           #1 Worldview Theory            │
└─────────────────────────────────────────┘
                    ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ #1 Literature Review: Lao Society and Culture │
└─────────────────────────────────────────┘
                    ↓
```

#1 Analysis of *Khwan* Rituals

➔ Emic Descriptions in Lao Literature
➔ Participant Observations
➔ Interviews with Ritual Specialist
➔ Ritual Specialist Manuals
➔ Lay Person Questionnaire

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┌──────────────────────┐   ┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│ #3  How might Lao    │   │ #2  Analysis of Social Change in Laos │
│ worldview themes     │   └─────────────────────────────────────┘
│ impact and be        │                    ↓
│ impacted by          │   ┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Biblical             │   │ B.  The Impact of Social Change on Lao │
│ Narratives?          │   │     Worldview Themes                │
└──────────────────────┘   └─────────────────────────────────────┘
         ↓                              ↓
┌──────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────┐
│ C.  Examples of how Lao │ │ A. Lao Worldview Themes │ │ #4 Hermeneutics  │
│ worldview impacts    │ ← │                      │   │ of Paul          │
│ and is impacted by   │   └──────────────────────┘   │ Ricoeur for      │
│ biblical narratives  │                              │ interpretation   │
└──────────────────────┘                              │ of meaning       │
                                                       └──────────────────┘
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D. An Incarnational Model of Meaning for Communication with Lao People

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│     Strategies for Communicating the Gospel          │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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FIGURE 1

METHODOLOGICAL FLOW CHART

The best studies of Lao culture and society were written predominately by French scholars until Laos officially won its independence from France in 1953.[17] There were several important English language scholars who emerged in the 1960s.[18] The LPRP took power on December 2, 1975. Since then, Evans has written the most significant studies on Lao culture and society.[19] Other articles on Lao culture have been published, but they have often been the result of short-term work done by experts under contract with international organizations, whose projects were approved by the government.[20] The limited number of serious studies of Lao culture made it appropriate to consider some of the literature on the central Thai (Rajadhon 1962; Terwiel 1994), the northeast Thai (Tambiah 1970), and the nothern Thai (R. B. Davis 1984; Potter 1977). Given the similarity in culture and language, this literature provided direction for my research a number of times.

The next step was to conduct a thorough analysis of Lao *khwan* rituals in the field. In the section that follows, I describe the method used to gather the data on *khwan* rituals. I used data from emic descriptions and my own participant observations to construct a structural, symbolic analysis of the ritual process, the ritual objects, the occasions for

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[17] The most significant French scholars of Lao culture were Luis Finot (1917), Georges Condominas (1998), Charles Archaimbault (1964), René de Berval (1956), Pierre-Bernard Lafont (1978) and Marcel Zago (1972). I have not mentioned Lao scholars who contributed in Lao and French, such as Phya Anuman Rajadhon.

[18] The most important English speaking scholars who have written about Laos are Joel Halpern (1958) and Frank M. LeBar (1960). Although their work on Laos has been primarily from a historical perspective, Martin Stuart-Fox (1986), and MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff (1986) should also be mentioned here.

[19] See Grant Evans' books, *Lao Peasants under Socialism* (1990)*, The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance: Laos Since 1975* (1998), and the collection of articles he edited--*Laos: Culture and Society* (1999).

[20] For examples see Mukherjee and Jose (1982), Ovesen (1999), and Trankell (1999a).

performing *khwan* rituals, and the place of *khwan* rituals within the larger religious ritual structure of Lao society. This structural analysis was then used to write, as Clifford Geertz has termed it, a "thick description" (1973) of my understanding of the traditional Lao meaning of *khwan* rituals. Social change issues in Laos were then considered for their impact on the meaning of *khwan* rituals.

Next, the interpretation of *khwan* rituals was used to identify worldview themes in terms of deep affective images and cognitive assumptions. Previous studies on the worldview of the Thai and Lao guided my analysis and the conclusions on worldview themes. The worldview themes identified a number of deep level cultural issues that need to be considered in Christian witness, but they did not offer a great deal in terms of what kind of strategies should be used in communicating a biblical response to these issues.

The next research task was to consider the philosophy of Ricoeur for interpretation of culture and the communication of the gospel in context. I was already familiar with Ricoeur's work before beginning my research, and his hermeneutics structured my approach to interpreting the data on Lao worldview themes throughout the research. The study of Ricoeur allowed me to consider his hermeneutical method more deliberately for cultural interpretation, and to reflect on his hermeneutical approach to the subject. This approach was then used to construct a model of communicating cross-culturally. This model builds on contextual models that are based on the code model of communication, but it moves beyond these in important ways.

Finally, using Ricoeur's hermeneutical method I reflected on how Lao worldview themes might impact and be impacted by two biblical narratives. This exercise is meant to illustrate two issues. First, it illustrates Lamin Sanneh's (1989) insight that Christianity

both impacts and is impacted by each local context that it enters. But Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach to the subject suggests that Sanneh's insight needs to be taken a step further, since meaning is not so much impacted as it is literally born anew--incarnated--in each context. The second purpose of the reflections on the biblical narratives is to illustrate how meaning is incarnated in context and not handed off from one person to another. This will be more fully explained in the following two chapters.

The last research task was a study of communication theory. It focused on the contribution of inference and relevance theories to the code model of communication. Using these theoretical insights, I then analyzed the worldview inferences that shape relevance for the Lao in communication. The worldview themes identified in the third tutorial at Fuller Seminary were then taken up again and considered in the light of the Douglas model of grid and group (1970). This provided a way of organizing and interpreting the data so that Lao society could be understood relative to other societies in the world. It also made it possible to construct communication strategies that take their cue from the social dimensions that shape, and are shaped by, Lao worldview (or to use Douglas's word, "cosmology").

Field Research Methodology

Working and living among the Lao people allowed me to gain a thorough knowledge of the Lao language (Vientiane Lao), travel extensively throughout the Lao PDR, and be given many opportunities to observe and participate in Lao ritual life (religious and civil). I honestly do not know how many *khwan* rituals I have observed over the years. During the course of my research project, however, I observed,

participated in, and documented fourteen of these rituals. The documentation was done in the form of photographs, video, and field notes, between 1996 and 2001.

I also conducted seven interviews (each lasting about two hours) with *mawphawn* (literally "doctor of blessing") Somchit (not his real name), who is a *khwan* ritual specialist. There were several informal discussions with other *mawphawn* that occurred after a *khwan* ritual was completed. In addition, I conducted one-hour interviews with three Lao people who are not *khwan* ritual specialists.

A third means of collecting data was through a questionnaire (see Appendix H) that asked for short, qualitative answers to twenty questions related to *khwan* rituals. There were sixty Lao respondents. I had planned to conduct focus groups but the dynamics of group discussion with Lao were complicated by a tendency for a person or a small group of people in the group of higher social status to restrict participation.

The fourth primary source was data collected from six Lao authored ritual manuals that have ritual words for *khwan* rituals. Numerous other discussions with individuals and small groups of Lao were held informally, but most of those went undocumented. Several times I discussed the information I was collecting with Lao and expatriate co-workers in Laos in order to profit from their experiences with *khwan* rituals.

Overview of the Study

This dissertation is divided into three parts. Part I deals with introductory issues of intentions, methodology, and the theoretical assumptions brought to the analysis of Lao worldview (Chapters 1, 2, and 3). Here, I will only summarize the chapters on theoretical foundations. Part II reviews the literature on Lao culture and society and analyzes the

data gathered during the field research on *khwan* rituals (Chapters 4 and 5). Part III presents the findings on worldview themes, an illustration of the impact these themes have on a Lao reading of two biblical narratives, and communication strategies for Christian witness to the Lao (Chapters 6, 7, and 8).

Theoretical Issues

In Chapters 2 and 3 I explain the theoretical assumptions I used, and how these impact the analysis and interpretation of the field data. The first theoretical issue concerns a theory for interpreting culture.

The theory used for cultural interpretation in this paper comes from the philosophy of Ricoeur and the anthropology of Geertz. Both argue that the interpretation of culture cannot result in an objective conclusion. Rather, interpreting culture is akin to interpreting literature, in that an interpretation can be written up in numerous ways which are all valid. As Ricoeur says, interpreting culture is similar to interpreting a text. This is not to say that ethnographies are pure fiction. The discussion on the hermeneutics of Ricoeur clarifies this by suggesting three interpretive stages: guess, explanation, and appropriation.

Guess is equal to our initial assessment of the meaning of an event or thing. This guess is then critiqued and challenged through an analysis of the structure of the text of the event. The structure of the event can be analyzed because it is "worldless." In other words, it does not belong to a world of relationships. The structure of a text, however, is not the place where meaning emerges. Meaning occurs when the structure references things in our world at the level of action and discourse, and thus relates to Victor

Turner's method of looking for the meaning of ritual in the very performance of the ritual, and not simply in its symbolic structure.

The second model that I use is the Douglas grid and group theory. These two social dimensions provide the tools for discerning how the Lao worldview relates to Lao society.

The third foundational theory relates to ritual. Ritual is key to the research of worldview themes if religion can be taken to be the crucial force in culture. The role of religion is to create the "'Word' . . . upon which the truths of symbols [in a culture] and the convictions that they establish stand" (Rappaport 1999:21). Religion forges this Word in ritual, which in turn aids the creation of the Word through the conventions summed up by ritual liturgy (1999:303-304).

The fourth theoretical perspective considers Turner's method of interpreting ritual symbols through structural exegesis and participant observation. Turner also supplies the theoretical concepts to deal with the social experience of communities in rituals of transition and transformation.

The fifth foundational issue discussed is a theory of culture centered in the concept of worldview. I argue that worldview descriptions have no ontological reality, but serve as analytical constructs that allow researchers to reflect on the implicit and sometimes subconscious deep level assumptions that shape the patterns of perception of a people in a particular society. Perception at a deep level is patterned most forcefully by religion. This deep level patterning consists of psychological images and cognitive assumptions. Worldview themes then are deep level patterns that are relevant to all people in a group.

The sixth theoretical perspective deals with the contextualization of the meaning of the gospel. Using the work of Ricoeur alongside Sperber's and Wilson's "relevance theory," I suggest a move from contextual to incarnational communication. The code model of communication, upon which most ideas of contextualization are based, deals primarily with the translation of cognitive information, and struggles with how information can be enculturated in dynamically equivalent ways from one place to another. Nevertheless, it is possible to build a more comprehensive model of communication with Ricoeur's insight that meaning does not arise from the structure of signs but from its use at the level of the sentence. This statement acknowledges that meaning is born in the event of action and discourse. Both are context specific. The second issue of concern in a communicational approach is to realize that communication is a social--that is, relational--and therefore, ethical act.

Analysis of the Data on *Khwan* Rituals

The analysis of *khwan* rituals is placed within the larger context of the literature on Lao culture and society. Accordingly, Chapter 5 provides a review of Lao social history, social structure, religious ritual, and *khwan* rituals.

Chapter 6 presents the field data on *khwan* rituals in terms of the three hermeneutical steps that Ricoeur has suggested. The meaning of *khwan* rituals is interpreted in terms of an insider's perspective (guess), structural analysis (explanation), and a multiple-level interpretation reflecting my own understanding of the rituals (appropriation).

Findings

In the final three chapters I present the findings of my research. First, in Chapter 6, the worldview themes in Lao society are identified, based on the analysis of *khwan* rituals. This is done using the Douglas group and grid model.

The second set of findings, in Chapter 7, illustrates the impact that Lao worldview and the gospel might have on each other. In this chapter, I read two biblical narratives and reflect back and forth between a Lao horizon (Lao worldview themes), a Western horizon (my own), and the structure of the narrative itself. This study reveals how the biblical narrative opens up new horizons of meaning for both Lao and Western missionaries to either fuse into their own horizons, or to reject the new horizons.

The final set of findings fulfills the ultimate purpose of this paper by suggesting a means of communicating the gospel to Lao people, given the social realities of Lao group and grid tendencies. First, strategies are suggested for dealing with the demand for group integration in Lao society. Second, strategies are suggested that deal with the internal structure of Lao relationships (grid). Third, using Kraft's three-dimensional model for Christian witness (1999), I suggest ways in which these communication strategies can facilitate Lao people encountering Christ at three levels. The first is the level of allegiance and social relations; the second is the level of power, and the third is the level of the Word (truth). Finally, in the communication of any religious conviction, symbolic moral power must be tied to the social vision of the audience if it is to experience the reality of the sacred (God). Therefore, I suggest how covenant can be expressed powerfully in speech-acts that pull all three of Kraft's dimensions together. Ricoeur agrees with Douglas on this point when he writes the following: "[s]ymbols are bound to

the cosmos. . . . In the sacred universe the capacity to speak is founded upon the capacity of the cosmos to signify. The logic of meaning, therefore, follows from the very structure of the sacred universe" (1976:61-62).

Communicating properly within the social structure (grid and group dimensions) can allow religious communication to be received with power. Christian sacramental power is essentially moral, and it is anchored to the teleological vision of the kingdom of God. This is not to deny a spiritual level to this power. Rather, it is to say that what makes spiritual power Christian power is the kingdom ethic established in the historical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

At the mention of the word "meaning," the incarnational quality of meaning in context must be addressed. This dissertation deliberately does not suggest what ought to be said about the gospel to Lao people. Instead, it suggests a strategy that facilitates an encounter that has sacramental power through covenant relationships with God and others, through Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 2

INTERPRETATION THEORY

A theory of interpretation of culture and meaning, informed by the philosophy of Ricoeur, has been crucial to the task of developing strategies for communicating with the lowland Lao. This theory has guided my interpretation of the meaning of Lao *khwan* rituals for the identification of Lao worldview themes. In Chapter 8, I use the theory to guide the suggestions I make for communicating the gospel within the Lao social context.

The interpretation of meaning is key to the communicational process at several levels. First, it relates to the meaning that missionaries give their own identity and worldview. Second, it impacts the meaning missionaries give to their encounter with Christ and his kingdom. Third, in order to shape their communication appropriately missionaries interpret the worldview of their audience. Fourth, the audience interprets the textual message that the missionary communicates. Fifth, the audience interprets what it understands to be the intention of the missionary's communication. Because interpretation of meaning is so crucial in communication, hermeneutics plays a significant theoretical role in this dissertation.[1]

Hermeneutical theory establishes a subjective and ethical stance for the research of ritual, worldview, contextualization, and communication. The hermeneutical method

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[1] Shaw and Van Engen call for four horizons: Old Testament, New Testament, the missionary's worldview, and the worldview of the audience (2001:129; cf. Shaw 1988:177 and Kraft 1996:448).

used for this study has been influenced significantly by Ricoeur's philosophical approach to the knowledge of the subject through language. Though he grounds interpretation in subjectivity he makes a unique and creative use of structural analysis.

I begin this chapter by reviewing Ricoeur's theory of interpretation. I then show the connection between his hermeneutics of the subject and Geertz's theory of writing culture (which he calls "thick description"). For Geertz and others like him, ethnography is taken to be another form of literature. His work allows us to see some of the practical implications of Ricoeur's philosophy.

Geertz is also important to my research because he argues that religion--as ideology--is the source of the power in worldview configurations. In particular, religious ritual is seen to establish the moral power of religion through its dialectical relationship with social relations. These insights favor an approach to Lao worldview themes through a study of *khwan* rituals. This position is also supported by the work of Douglas, Roy Rappaport, and Turner.

Finally, Geertz, is convinced that generalizations about the coercive nature of social symbols should be made from within societies and not across them. Much of the missionary activity of the past 200 years has relied largely on a structural approach to culture. If the weaknesses of a structural approach to the study of culture are to be avoided, Geertz (and the others) urges us to not only look at the internal structure of culture through ritual, but to enter into the actual performance of ritual symbols in order to interpret their meaning in a valid way. As I will try to show below, this significantly tightens the relationship between the interpreter and the group being studied.

I then take up a discussion of Douglas, who (like Geertz) argues that culture should be studied from within a society before generalizations are attempted across cultures. But her chief interest is in comparing social environments in a less subjectivist way than either Ricoeur or Geertz would probably be comfortable with (Douglas 1970:xii). Douglas' theory attempts to connect symbolic meaning to social relations by comparing societies in terms of a typology of "grid and group." Using these two social dimensions she explores the relationship between ritual structure and social structure. Her theory is crucial for completing the loop that moves from observed social behavior, to the interpretation of the meaning of enacted symbols, to worldview perception, to the moral--sacred--power established in worldview themes that motivate and pattern social action. Douglas' work is used in this paper to do a tentative structural analysis in the Ricoeurian sense.

Next I discuss Rappaport. Rappaport's psychological, philosophical analysis takes the argument that worldview is established and empowered through religious ritual a step further. He introduces the concept of the sacred "Word," which is related to Douglas' conviction that body symbolism mirrors the social body and to Ricoeur's discussion of narrative identity.

Turner's work is then briefly reviewed. His insights into how ritual temporarily unstructures society in order to re-make it are important for understanding the function of *khwan* rituals. He also offers his own angle on the need to interpret symbols as they are enacted rather than as isolated entities. Finally, he thoroughly describes the nature of symbols and how they should be analyzed.

Finally, worldview theory is discussed. First, its historical development is traced. Special attention is given to how three Christian missiologists understand worldview theory. Then worldview theory is considered in light of some of its most common criticisms. Particularly, worldview is evaluated in light of the postmodern position represented by Ricoeur, Geertz, and Rappaport.

Paul Ricoeur: Reading Culture

Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach to culture considers the meaning of social symbols from the vantage point of language. When considering the production of meaning, he draws an important distinction between the sense of a sentence and its reference. This distinction rests on a belief in the metaphorical nature of language that he applies to a theory of symbols. These ideas are then considered at the level of a text, which might be a written one or a social and cultural one (e.g., a ritual, a collective memory, a historical event, and so on). The discussion on Ricoeur concludes by looking at how he brings these various arguments together into a theory of reading culture.

Sense and Reference

Ricoeur's understanding of linguistic meaning presumes several levels of dialectical tension. The first is the tension between language as a system of signs, and language as discourse (speech).[2] Discourse is taken up in the idea of social action. For the purpose of this paper I will speak of action as being interchangeable with discourse, since

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[2] This distinction is borrowed from Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (Ricoeur 1976; see Saussure's book, *Course in General Linguistics*, 1966).

discourse is a type of action (Ricoeur 1991).[3] Action then reveals a second level dialectic that breaks down into meaning and event. The event of action is the actual event. It becomes fixed, sometimes in writing and sometimes in social memory. By "fixed," Ricoeur means that the meaning of action is inscribed in the semantics (structure) of the sentences (or the links we see between actions such as in ritual) that make up a text. A text, Ricoeur says, is distinct from a sentence in that it is a collection of sentences whose "structured totality . . . cannot be reduced to the sentences whereof it is composed" (J. B. Thompson 1981:13). In other words, a text is a collection of sentences that together tell a story (see Table 2).

The objectification of the event of action in social records and memory (as a text) places it in tension with the meaning of action. Complex actions, in particular, are not understood directly but indirectly through the objectification of action in the form of a text. Institutionalized social meaning (the interpretation of texts) functions to shape assumptions, values, and norms that along with other social realities pattern human behavior.

At the third level, the meaning attributed to an action gives way to a new dialectic between the utterance meaning and the utterer's meaning. From this comes Ricoeur's well-known idea that "the author is dead to the text" (1981a:147). By this he means that the author's meaning (utterer's meaning) is not equal to the structural meaning of the

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[3] See also Douglas' discussion of public memory as a source of stored patterns of public events (1986:70). Douglas' idea of the selective memory of institutions is not unrelated to Ricoeur's idea of text as the fixation of discourse and action in writing. Douglas, however, sees texts as public memory as well as written texts as such. I believe Ricoeur would agree with this extension of the idea.

TABLE 2

DIALECTICAL TENSION IN RICOEUR'S HERMENUTICS

Language	
Language as Code/System (Collective, Unconscious, Synchronic, Compulsory) *Open to Systematic Scientific Investigation of the Signs that Make Up the Code* (Semiotics = the signs in the sentence)	**Language as Discourse/Message** (Individual, Conscious, Diachronic, Contingent) *Indirect Investigation of Sentences through Multiple Human Sciences* (Semantics = the structure of the sentence)
Discourse at the Level of the Sentence	
Meaning of Discourse (Propositional content determined by the predicate of the sentence, "the said," the intertwining of noun and verb)	**Event of Discourse** (The actualizing of discourse in time.)
Meaning Survives the Event as . . .	
Utterance Meaning Designation by the predicate of quality, category, types (Objective, propositional content)	**Utterer's Meaning** Identification of the subject (Subjective meaning of the speaker)
Utterance Meaning in the Sentence	
Sense (Surface, literal, logical meaning)	**Reference to a World** (The claim to be true)
Metaphorical Meaning	
Lexical meaning of Words (Literal meaning)	Metaphorical tension between words that create new figurative meaning with a surplus ---undefined meaning.
Linguistic Metaphoric	*Symbolic Meaning*

Lexical Literal Meaning structure	**Figurative** Metaphorical Surplus of meaning Structure	**Non-Linguistic** Surplus of meaning produced by the tension between desire and culture often unconscious deep level meaning

The Metaphorical/Symbolic Surplus of Meaning	
Fiction ←→ **Redescription** A place of non-involvement for trying out new horizons	
Action Response	
Rejection Of the new way/visions of being in the world	**Fusion of Horizons** Merging old data and experience with new data and experience

narrative in the text (utterance meaning). The utterance meaning is the propositional (informational) content found in the semantics of the sentence.

A fourth level of dialectical tension arises out of the utterance meaning of discourse in the form of a tension between the sense and reference of the sentence. In action that is fixed as a text, the objectified meaning may be approached through two questions. First, "What happened?" This question asks for the sense of the text. The sense of the text contains the propositional information contained in the structure of the sentence. The second question that is brought to the text of action (and discourse) is, "Why did it happen?" The second question asks for the reference of the text to things and situations in the world of the reader. It is important to note here that if only the individual parts of action are considered, the distinction between sense and reference cannot be discerned. It is only at the level of the sentence, or in the case of action, or of "performance" (to borrow an idea from Turner), that it is possible to see that the reference of language (or action) is "directed beyond itself" (Ricoeur 1976:20). This reference, (and this becomes more clear below in the discussion on metaphor and symbol), opens up new horizons of meaning that impact humans as new possible ways of being in the world.

The sense of the action refers back to the agent of the act in two ways. First, the act of doing something refers back to the agent of the action because the agent has caused something to happen. The propositional (sense) meaning of the act is grounded in the structure of the act which points backwards to reference the agent of the action. This is the locutionary side of the act. This answers the question, "What?"

Second, action is marked by the psychological intentions of the agent of the action. In this way the agent's intentions are at one in the same time distinct from, yet preserved by the semantics or structure of the event. This is the illocutionary side of the act. The reference of the act is the relevance that the interpreting community finds in the intentions of the agent of action. The reference of action is the subjective side of meaning applied by the community which interprets it in light of their circumstances (Ricoeur 1976:19-20). This answers the question, "Why?" This approach relates closely to Sperber and Wilson's (1995) relevance theory that will be discussed in Chapter 3.

"This notion of bringing experience to language is the ontological condition of reference" (Ricoeur 1976:21).[4] In other words, human action references back to the agent of the action and forward to the public who reads--interprets--the action. This social aspect in the construction of meaning raises the issue of what Ricoeur calls the "interlocutionary act." This is an assertion on the part of the agent that expects agreement on the meaning of action. It creates the "connecting operation of communication" (1976:15). Being-together is the existential condition for the possibility of any meaningful structure in communication. This social aspect to meaning overcomes human isolation and begins to address the question, "Who?" as described in the following:

> Something is transferred from one sphere of life to another. This something is not the experience as experienced, but its meaning. Here is the miracle. The experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public. Communication in this way is the overcoming of the radical non-communicability of the lived experience as lived (1976:16).

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[4] The word "ontological" will appear numerous times in describing Ricoeur's work and so it is worth defining. "Ontology" refers to "a transcendental analysis . . . of the preconditions of human 'being-in-the-world'" (Norris 1987:80-81).

When discourse or action is fixed in writing, there are new problems that arise for interpretation. While this issue is not of primary significance for the interpretation of culture, it is for the interpretation of the Bible. Since I am writing for the situation in Laos, however, I will leave Ricoeur's comments on this issue aside. As I will show in Chapter 5, literacy in Laos is not high and even those who can read do not read very often. This places the interpretation of the gospel in Laos in a highly dialogical situation.[5]

Metaphors and Symbols in Language

Through the study of metaphor, Ricoeur allows us to return to his idea that the agent's meaning in an action is never equal to the meaning attributed to it by an audience who interprets that action's meaning. Ricoeur's idea also sheds light on the miracle of the communication of meaning from one person to other people. While his discussion below focuses on the metaphorical nature of language, Ricoeur is aware of the application of his comments to the metaphorical nature of social action.

Ricoeur points out that we have more ideas than we have words, and because of this we have to "stretch the significations of those we do have beyond their ordinary use" (1976:48). The way in which we expand our ability to signify is through metaphors. Metaphors always operate at the semantic level of language, since metaphors only exist as they are spoken or read. When metaphors are spoken, they reveal themselves within the tension between the meaning of two concepts. This tension calls for interpretation that brings the meaning of the metaphor to life. Metaphors do not point to some prior category

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[5] Ritual can be likened to a written text. Whether the text is a written text or a remembered action, the issue is the distance an audience is from the discourse or the action. In both cases the audience meaning is not equal to the author's/actor's. Nevertheless, meaning is anchored in the structure of the text/action.

of thought. They convey new information. This is why Ricoeur can say, "there are no live metaphors in a dictionary" (1976:50-52).

Metaphors have both literal and figurative levels of meaning (see Table 2). At the literal level, a word stands for some agreed upon lexical meaning. But when a word appears in a sentence in a relationship to another word whose meaning is in tension with the first word, a new meaning results that goes beyond, and on occasion, even in contradiction to, the literal meanings of both words. This new meaning, generated by the tension between the two, serves in place of an absent literal word. It reflects the figurative level of the linguistic meaning of a metaphor.

But metaphors are not simply substitutes, and they are more than signs in juxtaposition. This can be seen in that the meaning generated by a metaphor generates a surplus of meaning that goes beyond both the literal and the figurative levels of meaning. This surplus of meaning is created partly at the linguistic level of meaning, but moves past it to a non-linguistic level. The non-linguistic meaning of a metaphor is realized in its reference to key cultural symbols that condense social experience.

At the non-linguistic level symbols exist in the tension between "desire and culture."[6] Even so the path to this surplus of meaning begins in the semantic structure of symbols. Ricoeur points out that in spite of the existence of these two levels of meaning, most people experience them as "a single movement" (1976:54-56).[7]

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[6] The non-semantic level of the symbol is the subject of study in psychoanalysis, religion, and art (Ricoeur 1976:53).

[7] This is significant because it shows us that the while the connection between form and meaning is arbitrary at an analytical level the connection is experienced as a foundational relationship (see Hiebert 1989:109-116, who argues this more thoroughly than does Kraft; cf. Nishioka 1998:465).

Ricoeur explains the distinction between metaphor and symbol in the following comment:

> Metaphor occurs in the already purified universe of the *logos* [semantics], while the symbol hesitates on the dividing line between *bios* and *logos*. It testifies to the primordial rootedness of Discourse in Life. It is born where force and form coincide (author's emphasis, 1976:59).

Religious symbolism, in particular, can be defined as "very complex, yet specific forms of behavior designed to invoke, implore, or repulse the supernatural forces, which dwell in the depths of human existence, transcending and dominating it" (Ricoeur 1976:58). The sacred power of symbols is manifested in the link between myths and rituals that are bonded together by the non-linguistic meaning of symbols. "Ritual . . . would lack the power to organize space and time without an instituting word" (1976:62).[8]

Ricoeur then reflects this theory of symbols back on to the theory of metaphors. First, he considers metaphors in "a chain or network." Metaphors stay alive by associating themselves with whole networks of metaphors that are governed by key root metaphors. "Root metaphors assemble and scatter." That is, they gather to themselves metaphors borrowed from diverse fields into realms of associated meaning. On the other hand, they maintain the ability to give birth to a wide array of new (potential) interpretations. A key connection between metaphor and symbol is that "everything indicates that symbol systems constitute a reservoir of meaning whose metaphoric potential is yet to be spoken" (1976:65). Ricoeur explains it this way:

> [The metaphor] brings to language the implicit semantics of the symbol. What remains confused in the symbol . . . is clarified in the tension of the metaphorical utterance. . . . The symbol remains a two-dimensional phenomenon to the extent that the semantic face refers back to the non-

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[8] Ricoeur defines ritual as "doing something marked by power" (1976:62).

semantic one. . . . Symbols have roots. Symbols plunge us into the shadowy experience of power. Metaphors are just the linguistic surface of symbols, and they owe their power to relate the semantic surface to the presemantic surface in the depths of human experience to the two dimensional structure of the symbol (1976:69).

The metaphoric quality of language allows humans to imagine. Models used in the physical sciences serve the same role that fiction does for poetic discourse. Both provide a "state of noninvolvement with respect to the world of perception or of action" where people try out new ways of being in the world (Ricoeur 1991:177). In this neutral space humans try out the possibilities projected by metaphor through the re-description of human action. Having tried out these possibilities, they then choose to ignore them or to act on them. In some cases these possible ways of being in the world come as a kind of prophetic call that must be responded to in obedience or disobedience.

"Without imagination, there is no action" (Ricoeur 1991:177). This is true in at least three ways. First, imagination provides the schematization for projects or games that give structure to human action as practices. Second, imagination is the ground in which motivation is processed. Through imagining we "compare and evaluate motives." Third, in the realm of the imaginary I try out my power to act (1991:177-178). The creative power of metaphor is alive at the level of the sentence but we apprehend this creative potential even more powerfully at the level of text.

Explanation and Understanding

I move now to a discussion of the actual methodology that Ricoeur brings to the interpretation of texts. For Ricoeur, explanation through a limited use of structuralism and understanding are situated "along a unique hermeneutical arc … within the overall

concept of reading as the recovery of meaning" (Ricoeur 1981a:161). Consequently, the concept of reading may be explained as the dialectic between understanding as guess, explanation, and understanding as appropriation (see Figure 2). All along the way meaning is being debated, validated, and revised by the local community. The first instance of understanding a text can be likened to a "guess." It is the first naive attempt at reading, and it is rooted in the reader's ontological belonging to the world (Ricoeur 1981b:243-244). This is a critical point of departure from structuralism in Ricoeur's hermeneutic. Ricoeur's limited--even temporary--use of structuralism moves past the worldless environment it creates. Interpreters must face their inability to escape their place in history and the tradition of their culture. From their place in history and culture they make face value judgments about meaning in their encounter with the text.

The next point on the hermeneutical arc is a unique suspension of judgment or what Ricoeur calls, "explanation." This can be referred to as an "objective moment." This objective moment, however, cannot be accomplished without acknowledging the impact
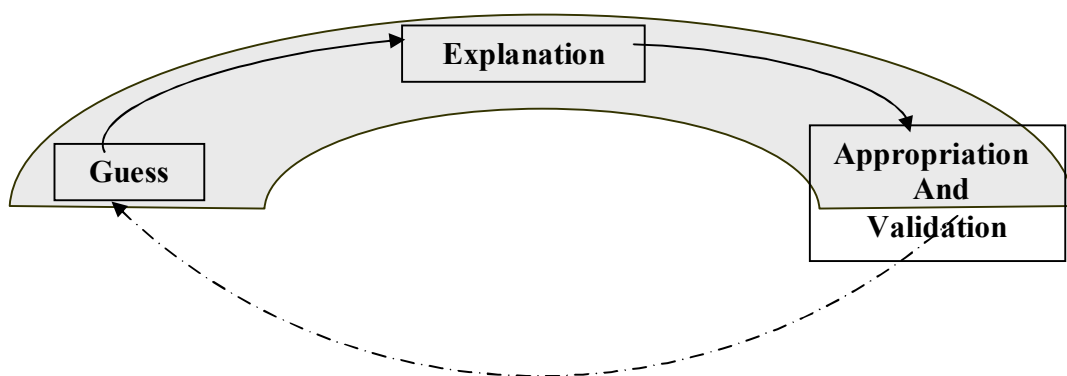
FIGURE 2

RICOEUR'S HERMENEUTICAL ARC

of our belonging to the world. Through a structural approach the interpreter does a surface analysis (answering the question, "What happened?") that seeks out the objective meaning. Then a depth analysis is done that attempts to objectify the underlying symbolic categories in the text.

The first purpose of this approach is to bring us to a point of view that will "allow us to notice features of language, as work, which we have failed to see before, even because of their very familiarity" (Thiselton 1980:428). This step serves to critique the ideology the interpreter brings to the text. Without such a critique of their pre-understanding, interpreters would be in danger of simply reading themselves into the text, without genuinely dealing with the challenge presented in the text.

The second purpose is a result of the first. In noticing features of the language that the interpreter did not see in the stage of guess, there is the opportunity to allow the text to speak to the interpreters' particular place in the world. At that point, they have two worlds before them. First, they have the world of the text that has risen out of the surface analysis of the semantics of the sentence and the depth analysis of the underlying dramatic units of the text as a whole. But this world of the text projects itself outward and away from the text in a non-ostensive reference to a new world outside itself. Second, interpreters have their own world of understanding before them. This situation calls for a fusion of the world of the text and the interpreters' world.

The third movement along Ricoeur's hermeneutical arc is understanding as appropriation. Appropriation serves as the existential part of interpretation. "An interpretation is not authentic unless it culminates in some form of appropriation

(*Aneignung*), if by that term we understand the process by which one makes one's own what was initially other (*eigen*) or alien (*fremd*)" (Ricoeur 1981c:178).

This methodology should not be taken to be a thoughtless throwing of meaning to the wind. While there may be many possible worlds opened up by the text's non-ostensive reference, Ricoeur points out that not all attempts at appropriation are valid:

> Thus the hermeneutical circle is not repudiated but displaced from a subjectivistic level to an ontological plane. The circle is between my mode of being--beyond the knowledge which I may have of it--and the mode opened up and disclosed by the text as the world of the work (1981c:178).

There are two keys to validation. First, there is the structural study of the text that provides parameters for the plurality of possible interpretations that compete for acceptance. Nevertheless, Ricoeur admits that it may be more difficult to prove which attempts are correct ones than to show which ones are invalid. Ricouer quotes Eric Hirsch in commenting on validation, "there are no rules for making good guesses. But there are methods for validating guesses" (1981d:211).

Second, the validation of appropriation should be done in the context of community. This is an argumentative process that may achieve some consensus but that does not come to an end (Ricoeur 1981e:78). The method for validating guesses in hermeneutics is logical probability rather than empirical proof. Ricoeur's hermeneutical method is charted in Table 3.

Let me pause to illustrate Ricoeur's hermeneutical method by borrowing an illustration from Anthony C. Thiselton. This illustration is taken from the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who went up to the temple to pray in Luke 18:9-14 (Thisleton 1980:12-14). To simplify matters, I will focus on the use of the term

TABLE 3

RICOEUR'S DIALECTIC HERMENEUTICS

Interpretation as Reading	
EXPLANATION The *Sense* of the "Said" (worldless structure)	**Understanding** The *Reference* of the "Saying" (presented as an option to my world)

Dialectical Process of Interpretation		
GUESS The Understanding of Belonging and Ideology	**EXPLANATION** Structural Analysis	**APPROPRIATION** Fusion of Horizons
Validation of the Community (trustworthy, unfinished, not guaranteed)		

"Pharisee." As twentieth century Christians who have been trained to see Pharisees in the Bible as villains, we subconsciously assign the role of antagonist in the story to the Pharisee upon our first reading. So our first guess at understanding the meaning of this passage is guided by our belief that Pharisees are bad guys. Pharisees, after all are usually hypocrites in our experience with Bible stories. But, as Thiselton points out, we miss the challenge of the story if we allow this pre-understanding to control the interpretation of the text.

If we take the next step of historical and structural analysis of the passage in Luke, we discover that the text wants us to hear the name Pharisee in a different way. The text asks us to make a connection between the term Pharisee and those we consider to be outstanding religious people, perhaps even ourselves. This is quite different from our

initial guess. The text confronts those "who were confident of their own righteousness and [who look] down on everybody else" (Lk. 18:9).[9] This demands that we clash our contemporary "lexical" meaning of the word Pharisee with the structural meaning of Pharisee in the text's world. Our first reading of the text could lead us to believe that it is teaching us to be careful about the way we pray. But a structural consideration of the text reveals that the text is telling us not to be confident in our own righteousness. The text presents a mode of "being in the world" that challenges our present one. The step of appropriation then calls us to fuse the new world of the text with the world we live in. We are forced at this point to choose to accept or disregard the challenge of the text.

Clifford Geertz: Writing Culture

Geertz writes that "culture is meaning and meaning is hermeneutics" (1973:6). Culture is "historically transmitted as patterns of meaning which are embodied in a 'complex of symbols'" (1973:45). But cultural meaning can only be said to be "stored" in the symbols that people have in their heads and should not be equated with the symbols themselves.[10] Humans choose to relate certain images with certain experiences and do so rather arbitrarily. But these symbols are not simply independent, cognitive significations. Rather the symbolic configurations of a society are both models of and for social

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[9] All Bible quotations in this dissertation are from the New International Version (NIV), unless otherwise noted.

[10] Kraft has challenged the notion that meaning is stored in symbols. He would rather have us recognize that meaning is always located in people even if symbols serve to trigger patterned responses of meaning in them. Kraft does, however, acknowledge that the relationship between a symbol and its meaning is experienced by people at various levels of association (1996:146-147). Hiebert, on the other hand, feels that there are various levels of relationship between forms and meaning (1989:110-118).

relations. Geertz offers a hermeneutical approach to interpreting symbol systems that he

calls "thick description."[11] He defines this approach as follows:

> a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which . . .
> [behavior is] produced, perceived, and interpreted . . . what we call data
> are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what
> they and their compatriots are up to. . . . Analysis, then, is sorting out the
> structures of signification . . . and determining their social ground and
> import (1973:7, 9).

The cultural meaning that ethnographers associate with the social action of the

people they study arises from the interaction of observed phenomena with their own

internal symbolic world. In saying this, Geertz is lining up with Ricoeur's argument that

meaning is produced at the level of the sentence (as in semantics) and not at the level of

the symbol (as in semiotics). The structure of what we read in social action provides

information but it also references the things in the world in which we live. Out of these

two realities meaning is constructed and ethnographies are written:

> Culture . . . is public. . . . Though ideational, it does not exist in someone's
> head; though unphysical, it is not an occult entity. . . . Once human
> behavior is seen as . . . symbolic action--action which, like phonation in
> speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies-
> -the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of
> mind, or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense (Geertz
> 1973:10).

Geertz breaks down ethnographic descriptions into thin and thick descriptions. In

speaking of "thin descriptions" Geertz is addressing the task of structural explanation, or

the sense of the phenomena, in Ricoeur's language.

Ethnographies arise out of the following steps. First, social behavior is observed

by the ethnographer as it is performed. The ethnographer then describes what it is he or

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[11] The phrase "thick description" was borrowed by Geertz from Gilbert Ryle, who used it in the
second volume of his *Collected Papers* (Geertz 1973:6).

she observed. At this point the ethnographer writes, in Ricoeur's words, the "said" of what happened but not the event itself (1981d:199). Ethnographers relate the structure of events as they read them.

Second, the ethnographer must decide how to plot the observed social actions in ways that allow outsiders to understand them in relation to their own horizon. This effort to understand the data requires emplotment of the events into some meaningful whole. In doing this a narrative text emerges. This is to say, they write what the observed events reference in the ethnographer's world at the time of the observation. In this sense, Geertz says, ethnographic writings are always second- and third-hand interpretations.

Like Ricoeur, Geertz asks us to notice the reference of the data to the interpreter's world as well as the "thin description" of the observed social behavior that produces it. Thick description, by contrast, refers to levels of meaning that the structure of action references in the world of the interpreter. Interpretation is the effort to understand someone else's understanding (Geertz 1983:5). Thick description calls for more than a schematizing of the structure of the action observed. It calls for participation, for trying on for size the symbolic world that the members of the group use to interpret the event. "Anthropologists don't study villages . . . they study *in* villages" (author's emphasis, 1973:22). Ethnographers try on for size the universe projected by the social action and symbols (or in Ricoeur's words "the world," or in Hans-Georg Gadamer's words, "the horizon") of the society they study. Then they write ethnographic descriptions out of the interaction between another people's symbolic world and their own. The results are equal to neither but suggest an expanded dialogue on what it means to be human.

Finally, the generic quality of these meaning structures, as they relate to the role of culture in human life, must be demonstrated (Geertz 1973:27). The distinction between the methodology of structuralism and what Geertz is suggesting here could be easily missed. Geertz attempts to show the difference by saying that in structuralism one generalizes across ethnographies, while in semiotics one generalizes within them (1973:26). The former lifts the generic findings of structuralism out into the abstract world of academics from a number of social settings, and looks for correlations. The latter looks across cultures from within the experiences of different social settings themselves. In this way Geertz hopes to find systematic relationships between societies.

Culture should be understood as a set of control mechanisms, rather than as structured or patterned behavior. We should realize that dependence upon these control mechanisms to order behavior is essential to being human. Unlike animals, humans have few instinctive resources to guide behavior. But how do symbolic systems of meaning control social relations, and how do social relations shape these symbolic systems? This points the discussion toward Douglas' grid and group theory, which, she suggests, offers a way of understanding the social dimensions of the coercive element in culture. For both Geertz and Douglas, ritual plays a key role in the coercive power of culture.

Summary of Ricoeur and Geertz

But before moving on to the discussion on grid and group theory, it is worth summarizing the arguments that Ricoeur and Geertz have offered this study in regard to the interpretation of culture:

1. Culture is a system of meaning stimulated by a society's symbol system.

2. Social action (and discourse) is interpreted as a text in that it is remembered (or considered) in terms of its structure.

3. Interpreting a text requires both thin description (structural explanation, saying what happened) and thick description (saying why it happened and who is responsible for what happened) that reveals stratified levels of meaning.

4. Generalizations regarding the meaning of social action should be made from within (by trying on the worldview of the text) societies and not across them. Interpreting meaning and comparing meaning across cultures implies two important things.

a. First, that there is a relational--even ethical--nature to the work of participant observation. The subject-object relationship is no longer. Now the relationship between the ethnographer and the people they interpret is subject-subject. Interpretations happen in the midst of social relationships and they have moral consequences.

b. Second, there are no final interpretations of culture. Ethnography is a narrative of the meaning that is experienced by the ethnographer as they try on the world of meaning of the society that they study.

5. A culture's symbol system is both a model of, and for social action. This implies that the interpretation of cultural symbol systems must be extended and connected to its dialectical relationship with the structure of social relationships in the society being interpreted.

6. Meaning systems are empowered to structure social relations and vice versa by religious ritual. How ritual accomplishes this will be taken up in the discussion below on the contributions of Douglas and Rappaport.

<u>Mary Douglas: Two Social Dimensions</u>

Douglas is heir to Émile Durkheim's view that society is religion and religion is society (Douglas 1970:67).[12] She is not satisfied, however, with Durkheim's psychological-functional explanation of this symbionic relationship of religion and social structure. She argues that "it is not easy to transpose [his] theory of ritual from psychology to social fact" (1970:xvi).[13] The sacred, she notes, can be configured in more than one way. The question to be answered is, "How does the sacred become impressed upon the hearts and minds of the worshippers?" Her grid and group theory attempts to answer this question. Grid and group theory provides a means for generalizing from within societies rather than across them. Geertz has suggested that religious (and/or ideological) ritual is at the center of this issue (1973:112-113) and Douglas agrees. The degree of ritual in a society is, for Douglas, a reflection of the degree to which the people of that society relate the body to the spirit. This perception of the relationship between body and spirit reflects in turn the degree of internal order and the group's control over the social relations of individuals.

With an increase in the distance between spirit and body, there is a tendency toward individualism and openness in society. With a tight view of the relationship between spirit and body there is a tendency toward conformity to social control:

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[12] "[Religious forces] are moral powers because they are made up entirely of the impressions . . . the group, arouses in . . . its individual members" (Durkheim 1979:35).

[13] "[Durkheim] based his whole theory of the Sacred on two psychological factors. One was emotional effervescence, the idea that rituals rouse violent, ecstatic feelings, like crowd hysteria, which convince the worshipper of the reality of a power greater than and beyond the self. The other was the emotion of outrage, the idea of sacred contagion and consequent dangers to the community unleashed by breach of cherished norms. Putting them together he produced a theory of social solidarity" (1970:xv).

Grid/group classification is indebted to the polarization of sociological thought between individualism and conformism which is represented by these grand dichotomies. However, in grid/group analysis, the conformist-to-individualist movement is subdivided into two separate dimensions, 'group' defining the choice of interpersonal contacts, 'grid' defining the behavioral options within personal interactions (Ostrander 1982:17).

In her book *Natural Symbols* Douglas defines what she means by the ideas of grid and group:

All I am concerned with is a formula for classifying relations which can be applied equally to the smallest band of hunters and gathers as to the most industrialized nations. All we need to know is the way in which these relations are structured according to two independently varying criteria which I have called grid and group. Group is obvious--the experience of a bounded social unit. Grid refers to rules which relate one person to others on an ego–centered basis (1970:viii).

These two social dimensions form two axes from which four possible cosmologies emerge:

Under high group constraints society and nature are seen as one integrated system. Low-group conditions, since they treat the individual as a separate entity from society, would tend to foster the symbolic separation of society and nature (Ostrander 1982:25).

This can be seen clearly in the way that high group societies view trance and ecstatic experiences as dangerous, and seek to control them with ritual specialists and shamans, depending on the level of internal order.

High grid social contexts regulate behavior, provide a degree of security, and create dependence. The restricted code used for communication in high grid societies is reflected in the frequency of formalized ritual. Meanwhile, low grid contexts provide freedom for individual behavior, do not provide security, and encourage independence.

The four cosmologies created by these two axes are depicted below in Table 4. Type A societies are individualistic (low group commitment and low internal controls), in

which people become less and less committed to one another and are drawn to exciting gambles for the big prize. They share a pragmatic bias, are socially mobile, value individual choices, are creative, have little commitment to community, and experience a high degree of alienation.

Type B societies are dominated (low group commitment and high internal controls). They tend to be minority groups within larger complex societies that provide few options, offer little hope, and have little commitment to the larger society. In this cosmology, actions are highly regulated but they do not enjoy the protection and privileges of the group.

Type C societies are hierarchical and compartmentalized (high group commitment and high internal controls). They have a clearly articulated metaphysic and a tendency to encourage speculative thought that makes the society vulnerable to disorder and independence movements. People in this type of society are loyal to institutions that reward them and they respect authority and clearly understand their roles. Authorities work together to increase their share of the pie, while not overtaking the authorities over them.

Type D societies are egalitarian and idealist (high group commitment and low internal controls) groups that are committed to sectarian culture. They become more and more antagonistic toward outsiders while becoming more and more jealous of each other (see Douglas 1982:1-6, 14). These societies are tightly knit, decentralized communities. Only the group's boundaries are clear to them; all other statuses are ambiguous and open. The relationships within each cosmology can be seen in Table 4 below. A more detailed account of the characteristics of each cosmology is provided in Tables 5 and 6.

Clearly Douglas' four cosmological types show a profound reliance on structuralism. But Douglas assumed that serious ethnographic description would be done from within society to test her typology. She is keenly aware that "an institution cannot have purposes. . . . Only individuals can intend, plan consciously, and contrive oblique strategies" (1986:92). Ricoeur has suggested a temporary use of structuralism to allow interpreters a chance at critiquing the ideological interests they bring to the task. Douglas' theory serves as the tool for this structural moment in my interpretation of Lao worldview themes. That Douglas also sees her theory in this light can be observed in her statement that "institutions have the pathetic megalomania of the computer whose whole vision of the world is its own program. For us, the hope of intellectual independence is to resist, and the necessary first step in resistance is to discover how the institutional grip is laid upon our mind" (1986:92). As a Christian, however, I see the critique of ideology somewhat differently. I suggest that for the Christian the critique of ideology lies at the very center of the religious empowerment provided through social relations.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics and Douglas' theory have this in common; they both do hermeneutics of culture from the standpoint of social relations. But there is one crucial difference. The ultimate underlying category in Ricoeur's philosophy is hope (Madison 1995:89), which is essentially a Christian hope anchored in the vision of the kingdom of God that is established by Jesus Christ on the cross. The life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in turn establishes an ethic of living "the 'good life' with and for others" (Ricoeur 1992:171-173). This ethic serves as the ultimate critique of all social relationships. I will return to this topic in Chapter 4 in order to consider Ricoeur's contribution to contextualization theory for Christian mission.

TABLE 4

GRID-GROUP TYPOLOGY
(Adapted from Douglas 1982:4; and M. Thompson 1982:34)

HIGH GRID	
High Ritual Area	
Structurally Authoritarian Cosmological Millennial Bias **B. High Grid, Low Group:** In any complex society some categories of people are going to find themselves relegated to doing as they are told, without the protection and privileges of group membership. They can also be fully controlled individuals (e.g., slaves) who do not belong to any particular group. **Example:** The untouchable castes in India **LOW GROUP**	**Structurally Hierarchical Cosmological Ritual/Sacrificial Bias** **C. High Grid, High Group:** Typically creates an environment of large institutions where loyalty is rewarded and hierarchy respected: an individual knows his or her place in a world that is squarely bounded and stratified. **Examples:** The societies of Japan and Korea **HIGH GROUP**
Individualistic Pragmatic Bias **A. Low Grid, Low Group:** The environment allows individuals to choose options, negotiate contracts, or choose allies. There is significant social mobility up and down. There is little commitment to the community and increasing alienation. **Examples:** United States, Western Europe, pluralistic urban societies	**Egalitarian Scapegoating /Shamanism Bias** **D. Low Grid, High Group:** A form of society where only the external group boundary is clear; all other statuses are ambiguous and open to negotiation. **Examples:** Hmong Hill Tribes; other kinship based societies
LOW GRID	
Low Ritual Area	

Trance is Dangerous and Controlled.

TABLE 5

HIGH GRID SOCIETIES

(Adapted from M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990, and Bell 1997)

Fatalistic Societies *Low Group and High Grid*	**Hierarchical Societies** *High Group and High Grid*
• **General**--People's actions are highly regulated but they do not enjoy the protection and privileges of the group. There is also little loyalty to the group. • **Theology**--Millennial bias. • **Leadership**--Authoritarian, big man takes full control. • **View of Nature**--Capricious, the world is random; life is dependent upon luck, not learning. • **Risk**--Do not knowingly take risks, What would be the point? • **Apathy**--An individual's vote cannot make a difference, their votes are seen in ways similar to the lottery. • **Economic Growth**--Happy when it comes but do not believe it results from their hard work, it is simply luck. • **Scarcity**--Permanent condition. They have nothing; everything is controlled by someone else. • **Blame**--There is no group to hold together so blame does not have to find external enemies; fate is to blame. • **Envy**--There is no use in envy because there is no hope of obtaining what others have, outside of pure chance. • **Sin**--Guilt generalized, secular tendency, violation of internal ethics. • **Trance** - welcomed, there is no fear of loss of self-control, some have the role (gift) of dealing with it.	• **General**--Loyalty to institutions rewarded, authority respected, roles clearly defined. Authorities increase their share of the pie while not overtaking the authorities over them. • **Theology**--Sacrifice and offerings. • **Leadership**--Bureaucratic. • **View of Nature**--Perverse/Tolerant--boundary between these two states is mapped and planned by experts/specialists. • **Risk**--Acceptable if experts agree. • **Apathy**--Abstention implies consent, attendance is mandated though opinions not shared. No group participation outside of assigned roles. • **Economic Growth**--Will lead to the group's overall gain. Imposes complex and stratified levels of needs on everyone. • **Scarcity**--Idea of limited good and the use of bureaucracy for control of distribution. Reduces collective consumption to invest. • **Blame**--Never blame the system. Blame is usually hidden or diffused among offices. Blame is shifted to social deviants. • **Envy**--Must be controlled; deflected by the notion that the experts deserve what they get. • **Sin**--Humans born sinful, redeemed by good institutions. Certainty and predictability are the dominant concerns, sin takes the form of external actions. • **Trance** --not allowed or tightly controlled by ritual experts.

TABLE 6

LOW GRID SOCIETIES
(Adapted from M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990; and Bell 1997)

Individualistic Societies *Low Group and Low Grid*	**Egalitarian Societies** *High Group and Low Grid*
• **General**--Pragmatic bias, social mobility, individual choices, creative, little commitment to community, and lots of alienation.	• **General**--Tight-knit, decentralized communities, only the group's boundaries are clear, all other statuses are ambiguous and open.
• **Theology**--Bias toward inner convictions and motivations, God as partner.	• **Theology**--Bias for shamans who domesticate power.
• **Leadership**--Spontaneous, flexible, rotating, network of relationships may be more important.	• **Leadership**--Opinion leader, but leader works for consensus before a decision is made.
• **View of Nature**--Benign, a hidden hand will lead everyone to good outcomes. Bold experimentation.	• **View of Nature**--Fragile, live in harmony with nature.
• **Risk**--Is opportunity, optimistism about the long-term outcomes.	• **Risk**--Results from oppression of the system, global warming, nuclear meltdowns, deforestation, are all unacceptable risks that discredit the system.
• **Apathy**--Implies consent (the silent majority), failure to participate says the cost of participation is not worth it.	• **Apathy**--They excuse it. There is no real chance to participate. They "unmask" power by showing how the masses do not have opportunity and are fatalistic.
• **Economic Growth**--Seek to create new wealth so that there is more for all and individual prosperity.	• **Economic Growth**--Little interest because economic growth threatens equality.
• **Scarcity**--No such thing if skill, knowledge, and daring are made use of properly. Use it or lose it.	• **Scarcity**--The threat of depleting resources is blamed on the system.
• **Blame**--Bad luck or personal incompetence, the competitive system itself is blameless.	• **Blame**--It's the system. Usually solidarity is maintained by blaming deviants (witches, scapegoats) who sneak into the group.
• **Envy**--Flaunt what they have to show others their power, envy spurs ambition.	• **Envy**--Must be controlled because distinctions between people are wrong; simplicity is the rule.
• **Sin**--Wrong attitudes toward the self; not actions, secular tendency, comes from stupidity and results in a loss of face.	• **Sin**--Experienced as pollution, humans are corrupted by institutions. Thinking must be changed.
• **Trance**--Not dangerous; benign.	• **Trance**--Dangerous, a matter of demonic possession or shamanistic control of power.

<u>**Ritual Studies**</u>

Ricoeur, Geertz, and Douglas argue for the importance of ritual in establishing the authority of worldview through ritual. In this section I use the work of Rappaport to establish the means by which religious ritual empowers worldview with moral and normative authority. Rappaport's arguments mirror Douglas' conviction that religious ritual reenacts the cosmology that sanctifies the social order. Then I look at the work of Turner, for tools that enable a study of the symbols in religious ritual to reveal the themes that make up the worldview of a group.

Roy Rappaport: Ritual and Religion Make Humanity

Rappaport's work, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999), lays important theoretical tracks for the foundational place of religious (ideological) ritual in human experience. He begins by grounding the origins of culture in language. Language gave humans the ability to distinguish between the sign and the signified. From the ability to make this distinction, humans gained the additional ability to think symbolically. The ability to reflect referentially on the world led to the creation of narratives that established the "truth" for each social group. All narrative is a sort of fabrication, according to Rappaport, in that its plot is socially derived and not equal to the actual events of history.

But the narrative establishment of truth also creates the possibility of "false" narratives that serve the interests of particular individuals and sub-groups. This raises the question as to "how humanity grounds the truths it must fabricate and how it distinguishes them from falsehood" (Rappaport 1999:21). The answer, says Rappaport, is

that society creates a "true" narrative through the establishment of The Word in religion (1999:322). "It claims a man. It determines his true life and conduct" (1999:348). A society's Word establishes the relationship between sanctity and order (1999:22). It "may be conceived to constitute nature" and morality "and thus human society" (1999:369). This narrative touches all the aspects of a person's life, it is all encompassing (1999:369).

The sacred Logos tells humans what the truth of the matter is. It is established when ordinary words are "drawn into ritual and subordinated" into the narrative of the true (Rappaport 1999:322). "Sanctity is a product of ritual" (1999:323). His thesis then is that the role of religion is to create The Word, "upon which the truths of symbols and the convictions that they establish stand" (1999:21). Religion forges this Word in ritual. Ritual accomplishes it through the conventions that it performs and speaks (1999:303-304). The Word ultimately seeks the well-being of the community and so it affects and is effected by social and economic conditions. Should The Word no longer serve the well-being of the community then there can be a withdrawal from ritual participation in order to restructure a new Word (see Figure 3).

By way of critique I want to insert a personal word of Christian religious conviction into the discussion on Rappaport's position. I want to suggest that for a Christian, there is a Word (Christ) prior to human Words (human religious conviction).[14]

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[14] The idea of a prior Word, "addressed to us rather than our speaking it," is borrowed from Ricoeur (1995a:65). This Word is the self-disclosure of God who says, through the founding events of Israel, the church and our own "personal adherence to this complex medium of self-interpretation," "I am Who I Am" and "God is Love" (1995b:495-497). It is important to realize, however, that in saying this Ricoeur is arguing religiously not philosophically.

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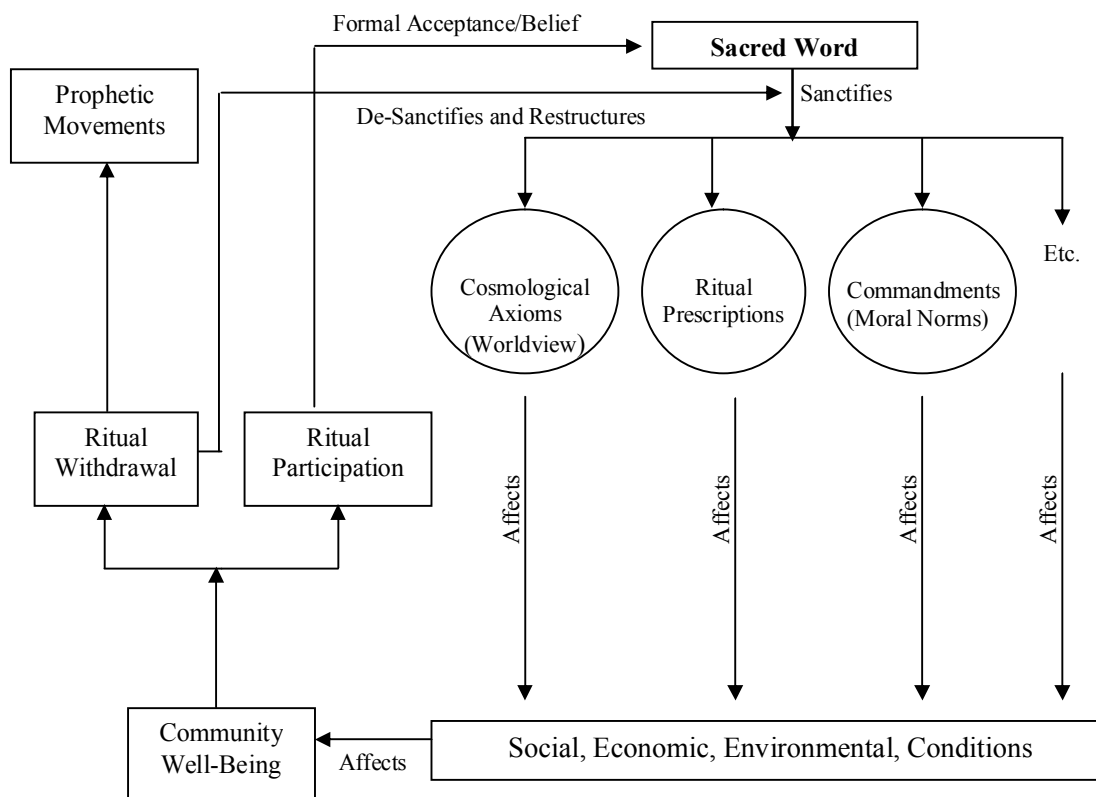
FIGURE 3

THE CYBERNETICS OF THE HOLY
(Adapted from Rappaport 1999:431)

This "Word" of Christian faith also seeks well-being for humans but does so through a call to submission and covenant relationship with the creator of speech (Jer. 11:4).

Nevertheless, I agree with Rappaport's conviction that religious truth is constructed as narrative cloaked in sacredness.[15] To make something sacred is to invest it

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[15] Kraft (1996:53ff) argues that worldview, not religion, is foundational. Some societies, he says, emphasize one aspect of social life over another (e.g., religion, economics, education, and so on) but all have worldview at their foundation. This argument accounts for modern societies that emphasize economics (e.g., the United States and Japan). But this does not explain the power that establishes and

with power. Religion does this through ritual performance that establishes "conventional understandings, rules, and norms in accordance with which everyday behavior is supposed to proceed" (Rappaport 1999:123).

Victor Turner: Interpreting Ritual Symbols

Both Douglas and Turner offer tools for analyzing religious ritual symbols that empower and establish worldview. They recognize that social relations shape worldview even while worldview is empowering the social structure. Since Douglas has already been discussed, little more needs to be said here. Suffice it to say that for Douglas, ritual is an expression of the cosmology that instructs and mirrors social organization:

> Any culture is a series of related structures which comprise social forms, values, cosmology, the whole of knowledge and through which all experience is mediated. Certain cultural themes are expressed by rites of bodily manipulation. . . . But the objective of these rituals is not negative withdrawal from reality. . . . The rituals enact the form of social relations and in giving these relations visible expression they enable people to know their own society (Douglas 1966:440).

I will use this thesis later in Chapter 6, to show the way in which Lao worldview themes are models of and for social relationships in the Lao PDR.

Like Douglas, Turner seeks to understand the role that symbols play in establishing meaning systems. He provides two sets of tools for exploring ritual symbolism.

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maintains a worldview. It seems better to argue with Rappaport and Douglas and say that religion establishes and maintains the worldview of a society. This view does not completely disagree with Kraft in that worldview remains at the core of a society. Religion (or in the case of America, the ideology of economics) is understood to be the means by which worldview is given authority. Whether I use the word religion or ideology, the fundamental convictions of a society are experienced as natural to the cosmos and this empowers worldview.

First, Turner sees ritual performance as "distinct phases in the social process, whereby groups adjust to internal changes and adapt to their external environment" (E. L. B. Turner and V. Turner 1978:244).[16] Ritual is a "social drama." By this he means that ritual brings into conversation what is happening in society right now with what has been established as the social ideal. The level of drama in the ritual is very often equal to the degree of disparity between these two. The drama in ritual reflects the tension necessary for reaching social harmony that can be envisioned but never perfectly obtained:

> The unity of a given ritual is a dramatic unity. Observation of the rubric of the ritual is deemed essential, for only by staying within the channels, marked out by custom, through which the collective action should flow will the peace and harmony typically promised to ritual participants finally be achieved (1978:244).

To achieve this, ritual first un-structures the structured. This is the liminal phase of ritual. In this liminal experience of the ritual, communities often experience a sense of equality, inferiority, lack of structure, and union to a heightened degree. Structure, says Turner, is a cognitive affirmation. The experience of a temporary lack of social structure can only be experienced and described metaphorically. Turner quotes Buber in an effort to describe the experience:

> [Communitas] is the being no longer side by side (and, one might add, above and below) but with one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it moves toward one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from I to Thou. Community is where [communitas] happens (1969:127).

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[16] The shift aware from the role of ritual in reinforcing the status quo of social structure, emphasized in functionalism, can be clearly seen (Metcalf 1997:477).

Having accomplished community, ritual then re-structures (often in new ways) the unstructured, leaving the members of society with a new way of coping with existence and informing social behavior.

Turner offers a set of exegetical tools for interpreting the various aspects of the symbol system that rituals enact.[17] His approach to the interpretation of symbols is represented in Tables 7, 8, 9, and 10. Table 7 shows the different characteristics that symbols have in relation to their ability to stimulate meaning in a society. Meaning in symbols is polarized so that at one end they refer to social and moral facts about life and at the other they refer to physiological facts. Like Douglas, Turner sees symbols as a way of uniting the organic and the social (Turner 1969:52).

TABLE 7

CHARACTERISTICS OF SYMBOLIC MEANING
(Adapted from Turner 1985:56)

SYMBOLS HAVE:	
Multiple Meanings	Ritual actions and objects can stimulate multiple and different meanings.
Unification of Meanings	Apparently disparate symbolic associations are united by analogy in fact and/or thought through some symbols.
Condensation of Meaning	Many ideas, relations between ideas, interactions, and transactions are represented simultaneously in some symbols.
Polarization of Meaning	The meanings that ritual symbols refer to are often arranged in terms of binary opposites or semantic poles of opposition.

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[17] For a fuller explanation of Turner's approach to symbols see his article, "Symbols in African Ritual" (1985). There is also a summary in E. Turner and V. Turner book (1978:243-255).

The semantic dimensions of the symbol are defined in Table 8. One of the key concepts in Turner's work is "processual symbolic analysis."[18] This idea is defined as "the interpretation of symbols operating as dynamic systems of signifiers (the outward forms), their meanings, and changing modes of signification, in the context of temporal sociocultural processes" (E. L. B. Turner and V. Turner 1978:243). More simply put Turner wants to interpret symbols as they appear in social action. In a similar way, Ricoeur said that symbols should be interpreted at the level of the sentence and not by simply looking at their lexical meaning.

TABLE 8

SEMANTIC DIMENSIONS TO RITUAL SYMBOLS
(Adapted from Turner 1985:60)

Exegetical	Consists of the explanations of the symbol's meaning provided by actors in the ritual system.
Operational	The observation of the symbol's use in the society and how members of the society relate to it.
Positional	The relationship between the ritual symbol and other ritual symbols in the symbol system of the society.

The meaning of a ritual object has several dimensions that need to be considered. Turner breaks down these dimensions as is shown in Table 9.

Finally, Turner defines the levels of meaning in a symbol system. Table 10 shows his definitions. Some of these definitions represent emic cateogories and others etic categories. For instance, the term "dominant symbols" refers to an emic experience, but

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[18] This term was given to Turner's work by Charles Keyes (E. Turner and V. Turner 1978:243).

TABLE 9

RITUAL SYMBOL DIMENSIONS
(Adapted from Turner 1985:61)

DIMENSION	RITUAL SYMBOLS DEFINED
Nominal	This is the name of the ritual symbol.
Substantial	A symbol's sensory perceptible physical or chemical properties as recognized by the culture.
Artificial	The technical changing of an object used in and for ritual by humans.

would be categorized by an etic analysis as a cultural theme. In a similar way, a root paradigm is an emic construction at the level of worldview. Emic categories of the symbol system are shown above the heavy horizontal line and etic categories below it.

TABLE 10

LEVELS IN THE SYMBOL SYSTEM OF CULTURE
(Adapted from Turner 1985:56-58; and E. L. B. Turner and V. Turner 1978:244)

Ritual Symbol	The smallest unit of ritual that still retains the specific properties of ritual behavior; the ultimate unit of a specific ritual structure.
Signifier	The sensor perceptible vehicle, outward form which carries a meaning.
Signatum	The meaning, sense, designation, denotation, or connotation associated with signans in a given culture or religion.
Dominant Symbols	Represent sets of fundamental cultural themes spoken to by a symbol.
Cultural Themes	Ideas inferred by an observer from the data of a given culture. Symbols are one class of this data.
Root Paradigms	A higher order concept than symbols. Consciously recognized cultural models for behavior that exist in the heads of the main actors in a social drama. Similar to worldview.

<u>Worldview Theory</u>

In the same way that anthropology has sought to distinguish itself from sociology, (and visa versa), the term "culture" has struggled to distinguish itself from the term "social." The concept of worldview emerged within cultural anthropology as a new attempt to define culture in terms of what went on in the mind of the individual in terms of a person's perception of the world. It has been an attempt to identify the insider's point of view (the whole construction of cognitive and affective meaning) used to interact with the world (cf. Mendelson 1968:576; Redfield 1960:86). Its roots are obviously linked to the strong western distinction between subject (self) and object (other).

Below, I briefly review the historical development of the worldview concept. Then I summarize some of the key components of worldview theory. This is followed by a summary of some of the main critiques of worldview theory. I conclude this section by arguing for the usefulness of worldview theory as one method of interpreting the patterns of social behavior in a cultural group.

Historical Overview

The concept of worldview is one of several attempts to describe what social scientists since Durkheim have described as the shaping of human behavior by social existence. It is true that the concepts of society, culture, and worldview are not identical in meaning. Nevertheless, they do share a common heritage in that all three abstract qualities of human life as objects for analysis.

Adam Kuper (1999) sees Durkheim's approach as rooted in the French enlightenment tradition that spoke of "civilization" and the science of positivism. Against

this view Franz Boas and his followers followed the line of German idealism and its concept of *Kultur*. German scholars tended to study the plurality and particularity of cultures (Kuper 1999:23-46). The tension between the sociology of Durkheim and the cultural analysis of Boas introduced a number of other polar concepts such as:

> [c]ulture and structure, change and stability, dynamics and statics, methodological individualism and collectivism, voluntarism and determinism, nature and nurture, macro and micro, materialism and idealism, facts and values, objectivity and subjectivity, rationality and irrationality, and so forth (M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990:21).

Durkheim was one of the first to propose that human behavior could be studied by a theory grounded in what he called "social facts." Social facts, according to Durkheim, are the actual behavior of individuals guided by forces that go beyond the individual. Social facts were to be used to compare societies in order to discover the social laws that shape human behavior. This gave rise to the idea that worldview plays a coercive role in shaping social action. These social laws were translated into a search for basic universal cognitive categories.

Later, Boas and his disciples reshaped Durkheim's search for universal social laws into the study of how the environment impacted the perception of each group in the world. Boas and his students believed that the human mind was shaped by factors that were later generalized as either cognition or personality.

Both the sociology of Durkheim and the anthropology of Boas are rooted in idealism. Theories more grounded in social relations have since critiqued culture theory and sociological analysis for failing to identify the ideological biases in society and in the ethnographer.

Personality and Culture

That Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) had a significant, even if indirect, influence on worldview theory can be seen in the following quotations from his famous *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). He writes that his goal was "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world" (1922:25). In another place he writes the following:

> What interests me really in the study of the native is his outlook on things, his *Weltanschauung*, the breath of life and reality which he breathes and by which he lives. Every human culture gives its members a definite vision of the world, a definite zest of life. In the roamings over human history, and over the surface of the earth, it is the possibility of seeing life and the world from the various angles, peculiar to each culture, that has always charmed me most, and inspired me with real desire to penetrate other cultures, to understand other types of life (as quoted by Kearney 1984:37).

Although he had a functional agenda in his study of personality, Malinowski's influence was surely felt by Boas' students who pursued culture in terms of personality.[19] Malinowski not only shows his awareness of the importance of the individual's general outlook on life, but he also shows an appreciation for getting at the native's point of view. Both ideas are at the heart of worldview theory.

Culture and personality theorists beginning with Ruth Benedict (1934) have sought to show that each culture has patterned tendencies of behavior that can be analyzed psychologically. Benedict's work achieved a breakthrough in seeing a general personality "configuration" in each culture. Gregory Bateson built on Benedict's

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[19] In discussing Malinowski's description of personality traits of the Trobriand Islanders of Melanesia, Benedict shows admiration even as she criticizes him for applying these traits across cultures unrelated to the Trobriand Islanders. She then proposes her own application of Nietzsche's personality types (which he developed from Greek tragedy) as general cultural patterns for her case study cultures (1934:50, 78). Bateson also cites Malinowski in his study of the Naven (1958:117).

configuration of cultures with the concept of "ethos" (1958:118).[20] Benedict's monothematic approach would later be improved on by Morris E. Opler's study of multiple "themes" which allowed for a more complex analysis of cultures (1945 in D. E. Brown 1983:576ff; Kraft 1997: ch. 3, p. 6; Kearney 1984:30).[21] A similar position was taken by E. Adamson Hoebel in his theory of "postulates" (Kearney 1984:30).[22]

Ralph Linton (1945), Anthony Wallace (1961), and W. T. Jones (1972) have carried the psychological study of culture forward. Linton translated Freud's idea of the subconscious into cultural studies in terms of "covert and overt" culture.[23] Wallace focused on the worldview of individuals in crisis with his analysis of revitalization movements. He integrated personality studies with cultural-worldview analysis through the term "mazeway" (1961:15-16; cf. Kraft 1996).[24] Wallace was convinced that it was important to move from "structural reality to psychological reality" (Kaplan and Manners 1972:168). He also used a statistical analysis in the study of personality and culture (Kaplan and Manners 1972:138). Jones has continued to define worldview as a statistical concept in order to ensure that the psychological orientations ascribed to a culture by

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[20] The "ethos" of a culture is "a culturally standardized system of organization of the instincts and emotions of the individuals" of a culture (Bateson 1958:118). An ethos is the underlying systems of a culture that continually reappear even while cultural content varies enormously.

[21] "The term theme is used here in a technical sense to denote a postulate or position, declared or implied, and usually controlling behavior or stimulating activity, which is tacitly approved or openly promoted in a society" (Opler 1945).

[22] Kraft (1997) sees Opler, Hoebel, and Clyde and Florence Kluckhohn (who argued for dominant values in cultures) as all arguing for a multi-thematic analysis of culture over Benedict's monothematic approach.

[23] Linton explains that covert culture "is a matter of psychological states, and the nature and even the existence of such states can only be inferred from the overt behavior to which they give rise" (1945:39). His concept of "real culture patterns" is another multi-thematic approach to the study of culture (1945:45).

[24] Mazeway "refers to the entire set of cognitive maps of positive and negative goals, of self, others, and material objects, and of their possible dynamic interrelations in process, which an individual maintains at a given time. Personality covers the same territory, but on a higher level of abstraction" (1961:15-16).

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ethnographers actually correspond to the personalities of the majority of the people in the society studied (1972:104).[25]

Linguistics and Structuralism

Ferdinand de Saussure relied on a fundamental distinction between language and discourse "which has strongly shaped modern linguistics" (Ricoeur 1976:3). This established a fundamental distinction between code and message that[26] enabled Noam Chomsky to distinguish between "surface" level observable phenomena and their "deep" level structures of meaning (Kraft 1997). Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941) were among the first to apply the implications of this insight to the study of culture.[27] Along with Whorf,[28] Sapir developed the idea that language creates cognitive worlds in the minds of people. "The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds not merely the same words with different labels" (Sapir 1929:210). Cognitive structuralism later critiqued the idea that the "semantic structures of different

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[25] Jones' model analyzes the orientations of worldview theories themselves to explain the differences between those that stress cognitive as opposed to affective orientations. Jones' analysis could be useful in contrasting Kraft and Hiebert's worldview models. Might their theoretical differences be accounted for by their differing personality orientations? See Nishioka (1998) for a fuller discussion of the different approaches used by Kraft and Hiebert.

[26] Ricoeur describes the following four implications of this distinction. First, a synchronic study precedes a diachronic study because "systems are more intelligible than changes." Second, "the paradigmatic case for a structural approach is that of a finite set of discrete entities." Third, meaning is arbitrary because it results from an object's relation to other objects in the system. Fourth, meaning systems are closed to external non-semiotic realities and therefore language no longer mediates "between mind and things" (1976:5-6).

[27] Sapir and Whorf were influenced by modern structural theory in linguistics through the Prague School of linguistics founded by Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) and Nikolai Troubetzkoy (1890-1938).

[28] Linguistic analysis, wrote Whorf, "is the view that a noumenal world . . . awaits discovery by all the Sciences, which it will unite and unify, awaits discovery under its first aspect of a realm of PATTERNED RELATIONS, inconceivably manifold and yet bearing a recognizable affinity to the rich and systematic organization of LANGUAGE, including au fond mathematics and music, which are ultimately of the same kindred as language" (author's emphasis, 1956:247-248).

languages carried with them a distinctive world view" (Evans 1999:10). In their place they put the analysis of the structure (or patterns) of human cognition generally.

Kenneth Pike, another linguist, then noticed that most people are not normally aware of the system of codes that make up their culture. The native's experience of their language is often very different from the linguist's understanding. From this insight came Pike's distinction between an insider's view, which he termed "emic," and the outsider's view, which he called "etic" (Pike 1967). As I will show below this idea was crucial to Robert Redfield because he believed that worldview descriptions should reflect the insider's point of view.

Claude Lévi-Strauss then used the insights of modern linguistics to look for underlying logical processes that structured all human thinking. He extended the idea that meaning is created by the binary opposition between phonemes in a language system, by speculating that the first, natural cognitive binary contrast that humans make is between the self and the other:[29]

> [Using these assumptions structuralism was] not interested in the specific meaning of the symbols any more than a linguist is interested in the phonemes of a language. Rather, [it] is concerned with the patterning of elements, the way cultural elements relate to one another to form the overall system (McGee and Warms 1996:310).

Stephen Tyler came to a similar conclusion in the study of cultural cognition. He wrote:

> [There is not need] to assume that the cognitive order is either systematically a derivative of or a predictor of substantive actions. . . . The

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[29] Lévi-Strauss theorized that the "binary distinction between kin and non-kin is resolved by the reciprocal exchange of women and the formation of kin networks in primitive societies" (McGee and Warms 1996:310-311).

formal analysis of culture, like a grammar, is concerned only with what is expected and appropriate (1969:13).

The search for the emic worldview of insiders in cognitive anthropology became a search for a logical structure of human thought that would apply to people from all cultures. It was not long before this methodology was criticized for superimposing western categories on to native worlds (McGee and Warms 1996:345).

James P. Spradley, along with other ethnosemantic scientists, sought to correct this problem by focusing on the distinction between emic and etic categories. Crucial to an ethnosemantic study of a culture is the discovery of the insiders' cognitive categories (1979:231).[30] While ethnoscientists did not rule out insights from observed action there was clearly a bias in favor of the analysis of culture through linguist taxonomies in order to achieve a description of the native's worldview.

From the beginning those who studied human behavior using Boas' concept of culture have been criticized for grounding their explanations in a people's perception of their world rather than in what people actually do. Boas and his students all understood culture primarily as "thoughts, moods, feelings, beliefs, and values" (Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen, and Kurzweil 1996:4).

Talcott Parsons and his colleagues attempted to connect the study of human perception with the study of actual human behavior with a theory of social action. This theory sought to combine work at the levels of human personality, culture, and social

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[30] Spradley says that this task is done by "making cultural inferences from (1) what people say ; (2) the way people act ; and (3) the artifacts people use." He is clearly most concerned with cultural inferences from what people say. He believes that language is the key to discovery of native categories of thought (knowledge) and defines culture as "acquired knowledge" (1979:5-7).

systems (Parsons and Shils 1951:234).[31] There are at least three aspects of Parsons'
efforts that contributed to worldview theory.

First, he made a clear distinction between a cultural system and a social system
(Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen, and Kurzweil 1996:4). Second, Parsons stated clearly
(what many had been thinking already) that culture had to do only with "the realm of
ideas and values" (Kuper 1999:53). Third, Clyde Kluckhohn's contribution to the
Parsonian theory of action was to center the study of culture in the identification of
values (Parsons and Shils 1951:159-167).

Symbolism

The study of symbol systems as part of the exploration of native worlds has been
something of a bridge between the conception of culture (and worldview) as knowledge
and the opposing conception of culture (and worldview) as values:

> [But] unlike ethnoscientists or cognitive anthropologists, symbolic
> anthropologists rejected the notion that culture could be modeled like
> mathematics or logic. Instead they used a variety of analytical tools drawn
> from psychology, history, and literature to study symbolic action within
> culture (McGee and Warms 1996:430).

Geertz, one of the most prominent symbolic anthropologists, has distinguished
between worldview--the cognitive, existential aspects of culture--and ethos--the moral,
aesthetic, evaluative elements of culture (1973:126-127). He defines worldview as the
local description of what people discern to be "the actual state of affairs" or "the general
order of existence" which is made emotionally acceptable by the ethos of the culture.
Furthermore, the demonstration of the meaningful relationship between worldview and

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[31] Parsons tried to pursue investigations of these three levels of human behavior by establishing
"an interdisciplinary Department of Social Relations at Harvard" (Kuper 1999:53).

ethos "is an essential element in all religions" (1973:127). Religion achieves this through a limited number of sacred symbols. Symbols, furthermore, are capable of serving this function because they communicate both the cognitive and affective qualities of meaning.[32] Worldview, for Geertz, is made powerfully meaningful by the religious ethos of a culture.[33]

Robert Redfield

Redfield was more concerned with comparison than with description. While he speculated about the existence of multiple worldviews, he did so while searching for primary and even universal types of worldviews (cf. 1953:96). His chief concern was the evolution from primitive worldviews to complex urban worldviews (Kearney 1984:40).

Redfield distinguished between culture and worldview in the following statement: "Of all that is connoted by 'culture,' 'world view' attends especially to the way a man, in a particular society, sees himself in relation to all else" (1952 in D. E. Brown 1983:14). He defined worldview as the "whole meaningful world of the native" (1960:86). He hoped to use the concept to describe this whole in terms of native categories (1960:86).

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[32] Spradley cites Herbert Blumer's book, *Symbolic Interactionism* (1969:2), to discuss three aspects of symbolism. First, "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them." Second, "meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows." Third, "meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person dealing with the things he encounters." Meaning, in other words, is the result of interpretation (Spradley 1980:8-9).

[33] McGee and Warms see three kinds of post-modern anthropological writing. First, some deliberately acknowledge themselves and their biases in the experience of another culture and in the writing of ethnography. Second, there are those that attempt to deconstruct the texts of ethnography to discover the biases of their authors. Third, there are those that believe that one interpretation of a culture is as good as another and that ultimately some interpretations are given authority based on the hidden issues of power and wealth (1996:481-482).

Redfield believed that there were both universal cognitive categories and universal experiences (1952 in D. E. Brown 1983:15-16).[34] Universal experiences followed the biological processes and development of the body (birth, puberty, sexual desire, death, and so on). Universals were to be deciphered from the initial conception of the whole (1960:19). "His aim was to be able to make comparative statements about different world views, and so to do this he set about identifying their common features . . . that could serve as a basis for comparison" (Kearney 1984:37). Each worldview has an orientation to the world.[35] These orientations cause people to "accept, maintain, become one with, yield to, obey, appropriate, transform" the world they lived in (Redfield 1952 in D. E. Brown 1983:19).[36]

Christian Perspectives on Worldview

Christian anthropologists, linguists, and missiologists have made significant use of the worldview concept. Below, I discuss Kraft's ethnosemantic approach, Hiebert's semiotic approach, and Yoshiyuki Nishioka's "process-mode-product" model.

Charles H. Kraft

Kraft's understanding of cross-cultural communication theory is heavily influenced by Eugene Nida's linguistic approach to translation and culture (1990). His

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[34] The idea of universal cognitive categories is adopted and developed by Kearney (1984). He suggests that these categories are Self–Other, Relationship, Classification, Causality, and Space-Time. He also sees an integrative function in worldview. His work shapes, in turn, Kraft's ideas on worldview universals (1996).

[35] This insight is not unlike Douglas' concern for cosmologies.

[36] Spradley and McCurdy (1975) consolidated Redfield's lists of universals (cf. Redfield 1983:14-15; 1953:94; 1960:95). They suggest that Redfield identified twelve universals. Each of Redfield's lists are different from one another showing that he was very much in the process of working this theory out.

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definition of culture also reflects the influence of the personality and culture school.[37]

Kraft provides the following definition of culture:

> [Culture is] a society's complex, integrated coping mechanism, consisting of learned, patterned concepts and behavior, plus their underlying perspectives (worldview) and resulting artifacts (material culture) (1996:38).[38]

In other places the structuralism that Kraft inherited from linguistics becomes more apparent. For instance, he describes culture as having both surface and deep levels (1996). At the surface level is the actual patterned behavior of people. This level of culture contains both overt behavior, which is observable, and covert behavior (such as thinking) that cannot be observed. Worldview exists at the deep, covert level of culture where the structure of reality is assumed to be true. As he moves toward a theory of worldview, structuralism is named. Kraft defines worldview as follows:

> [Worldview is] the totality of the culturally structured images and assumptions (including value and commitment or allegiance assumptions) in terms of which a people perceive and respond to reality (Kraft 1997: ch. 1, p. 2).

Besides the surface-deep opposition, Kraft also speaks of a person-structure opposition (this dual opposition is illustrated in Table 11 below). Kraft uses the second opposition to point out that, while meaning is structured socially, it resides in people (cf. Nida 1990:67-68). These structural relationships between symbols are arbitrary and

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[37] Kraft also attests to the influence on his theory of personality and culture theorists such as Benedict, Linton, Opler, and Wallace. Wallace is of particular significance because like Kraft he pays attention to the individual's worldview (Kraft 1997:22).

[38] This definition of culture differs from the one Kraft quoted from Kroeber and Kluckhohn in his early work, *Christianity and Culture* (1979:46). The idea of "pattern" remains here but Kraft has not continued to see values (which is part of Kroeber and Kluckhohn's definition) as a separate element to be identified. He prefers now to see values as part of the assumptions of a society. The phrase "coping mechanism" (a phrase borrowed from psychology) indicates a concern for the impact of culture on the individual.

TABLE 11

KRAFT'S MODEL OF CULTURE AND WORLDVIEW
(Adapted from Kraft 1996:59)

	PERSONAL BEHAVIOR	CULTURAL STRUCTURE

SURFACE LEVEL	**Behaving**
	
	Habitual Behavior
	  Overt (Doing, Speaking, Emoting)
	  Covert (Thinking, Feeling)
	
	Creative Behavior
	  Overt (Doing, Speaking, Emoting)
	  Covert (Thinking, Feeling)
		Patterns for Behavior
		
		Overt Customs that Pattern Doing,
		  Speaking, Emoting, and so on
		
		Covert Customs that Pattern
		  Thinking, Feeling, and so on

DEEP LEVEL	**Assuming**
	(Usually Habitual, Often Creative)
	
	Primary Level Assuming
	  Willing (Choosing)
	  Emoting
	  Reasoning
	  Assuming Motivations
	  Assuming Predispositions
	
	Assigning Meaning
	  Interpreting
	  Evaluating
	
	Responding to Assigned Meaning
	  Explaining
	  Committing/Pledging Allegiance
	  Relating
	  Adapting
	  Regulating
	  Seeking Psychological
	Reinforcement
	  Striving toward
	Integration/Consistency
		Patterns of Worldview Assumptions
		
		Patterns Underlying Primary Behavior
		  Willing (Choosing)
		  Emoting
		  Reasoning
		  Assuming Motivations
		  Assuming Predispositions
		
		Patterns for Meaning Assignment
		  Ways of Interpreting
		  Ways of Evaluating/Validating
		
		Patterns of Response to Meaning
		  Ways of Explaining
		  Ways of Committing/Pledging Allegiance
		  Ways of Relating
		  Ways of Adapting
		  Ways of Regulating
		  Ways of Seeking Psychological
		Reinforcement
		  Ways of Striving toward
		Integration/Consistency

constructed by people. Worldview structure, furthermore, emanates from several key cognitive universals.[39] Meaning resides in people and not in the symbols they use for communication (Kraft 1996:147):

> Like every other aspect of culture, worldview does not do anything. Any supposed power of worldview lies in the habits of people. People, not worldview, do the things that get done. Worldview, however, is that part of culture to which people look (unconsciously) to provide the bases and underlying structuring for their actions (1997: ch. 1, p. 3).

This is crucial from a theological standpoint because it allows Kraft to say that there is not one Christian worldview (1997: ch. 1, p. 17). Related to this is his belief that religion is not necessarily the core of culture and worldview. Rather, any society may reflect a culture that emphasizes any one of several different cultural subsystems, such as religion (in many traditional societies) or economics (in American society) (Kraft 1996:53).

Nishioka calls attention to four important aspects of Kraft's worldview theory. First, it stresses the function of worldview as a map for living in the individual's life. Second, he stresses the use of deep cultural assumptions in terms of cognitive universals (largely borrowed from Kearney). This gives his worldview description a dimensional approach that he uses to compare cultures. Third, his goal is to determine the structure of deep level cultural patterning. He breaks the levels of meaning in worldview down into worldview, paradigm, and model. Fourth, Kraft's worldview theory highlights the importance of change and its impact on worldview (Nishioka 1997:83-84). I would add that Kraft's theory allows for multiple Christian worldviews.

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[39] Kraft identifies five worldview universals: Classification, Person-Group, Causality, Time-Event and Space-Material World (1996:63-65).

Kraft's worldview theory is unique in that it attempts to demonstrate the freedom of the individual, (against all the constraints of cultural assumptions and images), to assign meaning and act accordingly. Kraft protects his fundamental conviction that people are capable of acting independently of worldview and changing their worldview. Perhaps this aspect of his theory is shaped by his goal of worldview change through missionary proclamation.[40] At the same time the power of worldview to pattern social action is taken into account.

Paul G. Hiebert

Hiebert is another Christian scholar who has given significant attention to the concept of worldview. He uses semiotic theory to define culture:

> In addition to patterns of behavior, culture is made up of a system of shared concepts by which people carve up their worlds, of beliefs by which they organize these concepts into rational schemes, and of values by which they set their goals and judge their actions (1983:28).

Hiebert uses two triadic frameworks (Nishioka 1997:95). The first is the distinction made between deep-assumption-surface levels of culture (see Figure 4). At the surface level of culture are the visible subsystems such as religion, economics, technology, and so on. At the next inner level of culture are the assumptions people in that particular society make about their world. At this level a meaningful belief system is created that integrates cultural life and makes it intelligible. At the deep level of culture cognitive knowledge is classified into taxonomical systems (Nishioka 1998:462). This deep level of a culture is the worldview of the people. "Worldviews are the most

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[40] I believe that Kraft's person-centered theology (which is also centered on the Person of Jesus Christ) has a lot to do with the final shape of his worldview theory (cf. Kraft 1991:41). Others who take a similar cultural relativist view of meaning in culture are Nida (1990), and Grunlan and Mayers (1988).
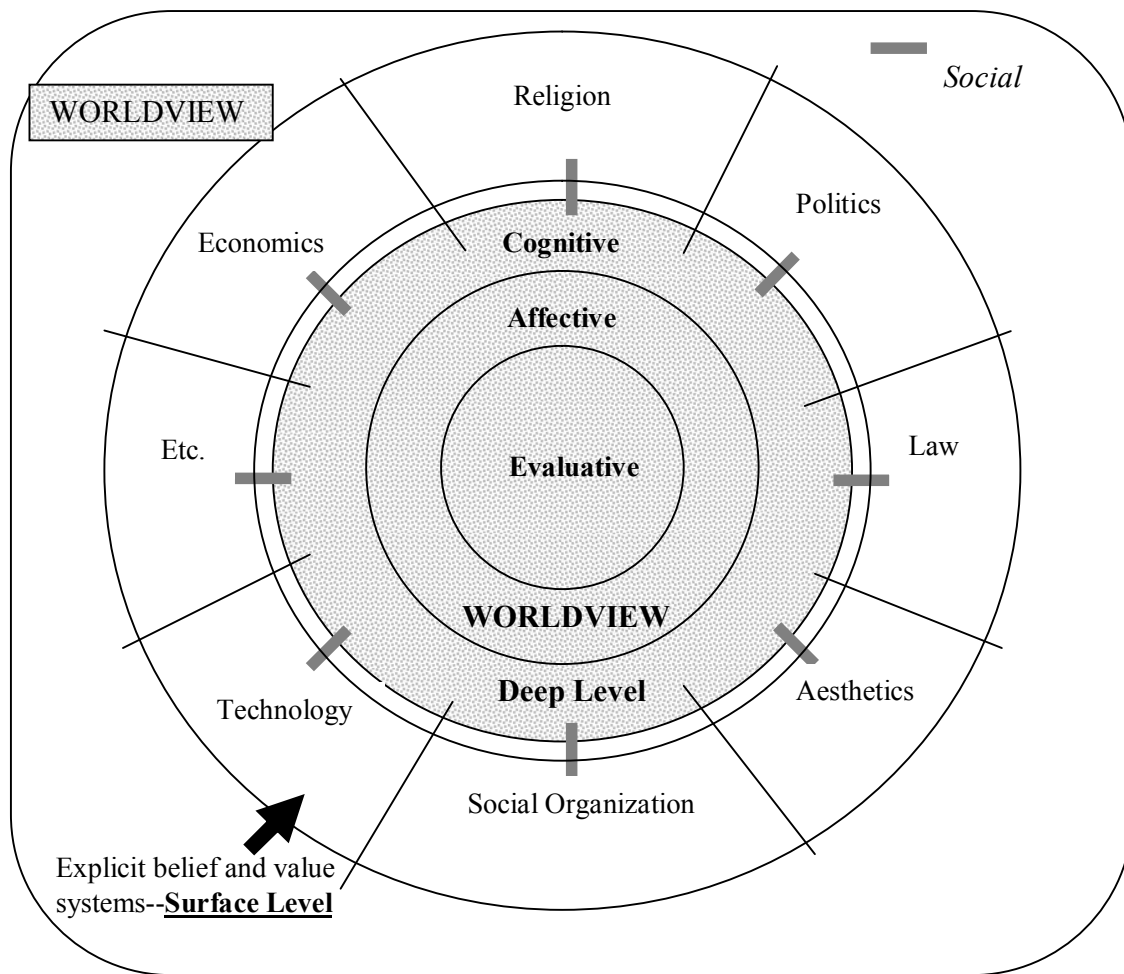
FIGURE 4

HIEBERT'S MODEL OF WORLDVIEW
(Adapted from Nishioka 1997:86)

fundamental and encompassing views of reality shared by a people in a culture" (Hiebert

1994:38). The second triad shows the cognitive-affective-evaluative aspects of

worldview. These correspond to technical, informal, and formal human knowledge.[41]

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[41] Hiebert aligns these levels of worldview with Hall's three levels of culture: "technical-cognitive, informal-affective, formal-evaluative" (Nishoika 1998:463; Hall 1959:28, 67-87). See also Parsons and Shils (1951).

Up until this point there are no large differences between Kraft's and Hiebert's concepts of worldview. The departure comes in the way they understand the role of symbols in the production of meaning. For Kraft symbols do not contain meaning. Symbols are arbitrary but are structurally arranged in meaningful ways by people. Thus, meaning is located in people and is assigned by them to certain arrangements of symbols.

For Hiebert, on the other hand, symbols and meaning can be related in one of several ways. First, they can be arbitrarily linked, as Kraft and other structuralists have argued. Second, they can also be loosely linked. For example, some symbols appear to be universal due to their resemblance to things in nature. Water for instance is typically seen as a symbol of cleansing. Third, symbols can be tightly linked to their meaning. These tend to be symbols that are tied to human experiences such as crying, laughing, and screaming. In dancing, for instance, the rhythms and style are largely the message. Finally, symbols can be equated to their meaning. Here Hiebert gives examples of historical, performative, and boundary type symbols (1989:110-118). An example might be the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

The semiotics of Hiebert's worldview theory rests upon the same structural code theory that Kraft's does. But Hiebert's view of the relationship between symbols and meaning leads to his proposal of a biblical worldview (1994:219). Although Hiebert would not claim that any historical worldview is equal to an absolute Christian worldview, he believes such a worldview does exist. A Christian worldview, according to Hiebert, is found in the Bible and can be partially grasped within our own worldviews through critical contextualization (1994:75-92). In terms of cross-cultural evangelism this requires a belief in a "supra-cultural" communication of Christian truth, by means of a

meta-theological process done at an international level (1994:93-103). Kraft also holds to supracultural Christian truths but in his view supracultural truth can be configured differently, yet authentically, from one cultural system to another to a larger extent than in Hiebert's view.

Process--Mode--Product

Nishioka attempts to move past the influence of linguistic code theory on worldview theory by taking into account the psychological processes of the mind in the construction of reality (1997). For Nishioka, Christian worldview theory in the past "overly emphasizes structural, synchronic, static, non-personal, and conventional aspects of human experience" (1997:124). Earlier efforts did not deal enough with diachronic meaning creation processes and with the figurative aspects of reality construction in a person's worldview.

Nishioka calls on contemporary studies of metaphor to deal with the figurative dimension in worldview. He approaches the metaphorical nature of meaning through "schema theory in contemporary cognitive anthropology and trope theory in contemporary symbolic anthropology" (1997:ii).[42] Schematization in worldview is the association of body experiences that interact with a human's most fundamental intimate environment. "Whereas schema analysis is a domain specific analogical approach to tacit knowledge, trope analysis focuses on how such schema interrelates with other domain[s] of [experience]" (Nishioka 1997:193). Both theories are synchronic approaches to the

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[42] Schema refers to an image of phenomena abstracted and simplified from complex external stimuli. They are vehicles for comprehension, storage, and recall of information (Nishioka 1997:191).

study of shared worldview knowledge. They do not deal with the process of constructing shared knowledge.

Nishioka presents his alternative model to worldview called "process-mode-product." His theory of worldview first suggests a distinction between meaning as process and meaning as product (mind vs. text). Second, he draws a distinction between internal mental processes of meaning construction and external processes of meaning construction. This creates a fourfold matrix for understanding culture, which is illustrated in Table 12. Nishioka explains that reality construction is primarily metaphorical and thus figurative. It moves from the whole (the whole image which reduces and sums up human experiences) to the parts rather than from the parts to the whole (as in structural analysis).

TABLE 12

**PROCESS AND PRODUCT IN EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL
ASPECTS OF CULTURE**
(Nishioka 1997:196)

	PROCESS: DIACHRONIC	PRODUCT (TEXT): SYNCHRONIC
External Visible	The behavioral processes (decision making, communication, and so on) and historical processes of cultural symbolism emphasizes change or development in external cultural phenomena.	Symbolic anthropology focuses on conventionalized products in cultural text (e.g., ritual, social structures and other symbols) in interpretation of meaning.
Internal Invisible	Cognitive psychology and cognitive semantics focus on universally shared cognitive processes (e.g., perception, schematization, memory, and the like) in the mind.	Cognitive anthropology focuses on product as internalized cultural text (e.g., cognitive maps, folk classification, and cultural grammar) in deeper levels of the mind.

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Nishioka has linked the process to the products of meaning construction with the concept of mode. "Mode" is the patterning habits of a person (or group) that link process with the final production of meaning (1997:204). Rather than debating between Kraft's and Hiebert's models, Nishioka places them within the larger total context of meaning creation. Once it is understood that Kraft's approach to worldview fits generally into the process-internal framework (bottom, left corner of Figure 5, with ethnosemantics) and that Hiebert's approach fits generally in the product-external framework (top, right corner, with symbolic anthropology), it is possible to understand that they each focus on a different aspect of meaning construction.
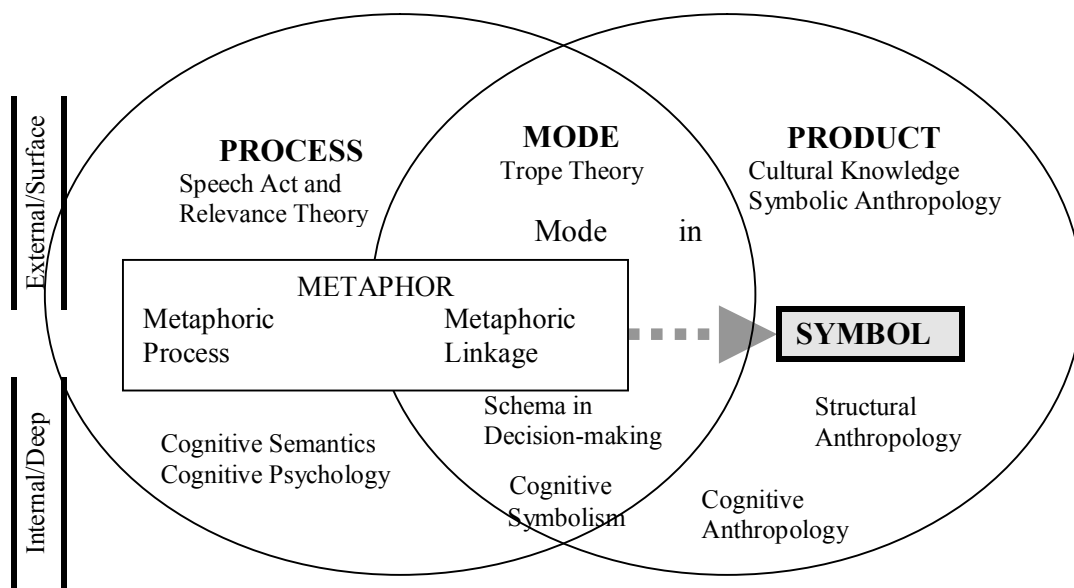
FIGURE 5

PROCESS-MODE-PRODUCT FRAMEWORK AND THEORIES
OF METAPHOR AND SYMBOL
(Adapted from Nishoika 1997:203)

While there are times when Nishioka does discuss levels of cultural conditioning (1997:206-207), his worldview theory tends to focus on meaning creation in the individual without dealing with the impact of social relations on worldview. The choice of the metaphors a person uses is often determined more by the social environment then by "underlying image schema rooted in bodily experience of space" (Hill and Mannheim 1992:394). Nishioka's model is most helpful when considering worldview as a mental process within the individual, but I am left wishing for more explanation of the impact of social life on the shared meaning of a cultural group.

Contemporary Critique

Worldview theory has often come under significant critique. Among the more serious issues raised are that worldview relies too much on structuralism, is too idealistic, presents a more integrated and coherent picture of society than is real, assumes that it is possible to really know another person's worldview and fails to tie worldview descriptions to social behavior. All of these criticisms have some validity, but if they are accounted for, then they should not disqualify the use of worldview theory for cross-cultural communication strategies. In order to make this argument more thoroughly I will address each of these criticisms and offer a response.

There are at least two aspects to the criticism of structuralism. First, worldview theory that relies only on the structural method has a general lack of concern for historical experience (Kaplan and Manners 1972:173; Ricoeur 1976:5-6). As Ricoeur has pointed out, it limits meaning to the lexical relationship between signs and leaves out the

metaphorical reference of symbols to the world in which people live. In the extreme form of Lévi-Strauss and Tyler there is explicit disregard for historical experience.

A second aspect to the critique of structuralism is that not all behavior is cognitive. A good deal of behavior is habitual and adaptive (Kaplan and Manners 1972:150). Structural approaches are product oriented and do not deal sufficiently with the process of meaning construction. Worldview descriptions need to account for both external behavioral processes (e.g., decision making, communication, and the exercise of the will) and internal processes that are image oriented and grounded in personal body experiences (e.g., perception and memory, Nishioka 1997:196).

If worldview theory is used in a strictly structural sense, then it will certainly fail to deliver an adequate interpretation of a culture's perspective on how its members view and interpret experience. But worldview theory has been about more than structural analysis since at least the time of Malinowski, who made it his goal to gain the insider's perspective. This was Redfield's aim as well, and Spradley has outlined the methodology of participant observation for pursuing the insider's view (Spradley 1979, 1980; Shaw 1988:109-116). Worldview descriptions clearly need to be tied directly to social behavior but a structural phase in research can, as Ricoeur has shown, provide new perspectives on the deeper issues that drive a culture. I find, with Ricoeur, a tentative use of structural analysis allows us to recognize the distance between the event and our perception of it. Furthermore, "systems are more intelligible than changes" (Ricoeur 1976:5). But this is quite different from the worldless logic that Lévi-Strauss sought in using structuralism.

Clearly, worldview analysis must not only discern the cultural grammar of a culture, it must also experience the use of the society's structure by participating in its

use. Furthermore, the charting of the structure of a group's worldview needs to deal with the emotions of the insider's that are stimulated by the symbols that make up the worldview. Mapping only the cognitive categories will fall short of an adequate interpretation of worldview.

Another general criticism is that worldview theory is too idealistic. There are several levels to this criticism. First, in-put from personality theory in worldview study normally assumes a "basic and universal need to order and organize experiences in some meaningful fashion" (Kaplan and Manners 1972:141). The actual perception of people is typically more flexible and less predictable. Cultural systems are able to maintain themselves even with a high degree of contradiction between institutional performance and the personal values of a society's members (1972:137). While humans strive toward coherence and integration, descriptions of worldview will have to account for a lower degree of internal coherence and stability than ever before.

This point is well taken but there are two things to keep in mind in responding to this issue. First, while worldview values and social behavior may not be equal and may even contradict one another, humans do work toward coherence even if they don't achieve it completely. Furthermore, a significant divergence between worldview and social behavior normally indicates that social change is going on and that the people in the society are experiencing a good deal of stress. Second, whether or not a person's worldview matches up with their behavior, their worldview does define what is meaningful and acceptable. Humans do have ideals in mind that they use to evaluate

experience and social action. This is related to Ricoeur's concept of the utopian visions that he believes all humans have.[43]

The second aspect of worldview theory's idealism is that it creates a false dichotomy between society (as a coercive, invisible whole) and the individual (Ingold 1996:59). Marilyn Strathern argues that "we are all living in the disastrous outcome of a long cultural investment in the idea of 'society' as an entity" (Ingold 1996:60).

There is no denying a degree of truth in this criticism. At the same time, reflection itself is void without a certain amount of idealism. The crucial issue is really how to ground our idealist visions in verifiable and valid data in order to keep them from being complete fictions. Tim Ingold's comment on this problem is also helpful:

> [T]here appears to be a formal analogy between the way in which "theory" has been constituted in social science through its opposition to "data" and the constitution of "society" through its opposition to "individuals." In both cases, relationships are disembedded from the world and inscribed in imaginative constructs that have an existence apart, leaving a material residue in the form of populations of discrete, pre-constituted entities or events. Thus, to do away with the dichotomy between society and individuals is simultaneously to do away with that between theory and data (1996:59).

A third criticism is that a person can learn a worldview without internalizing it (Kaplan and Manners 1972:137). Then, there are people who can function in, and even feel ownership of, several worldviews. It is therefore important in research to identify the primary worldview and show how it relates to other worldview allegiances. It is also important to identify which worldviews are used in which contexts.[44] This is a good

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[43] It is worth pointing out that utopian ideals tend to look backwards to the ancestors while in western modern societies they often look forward to some eschatological vision.

[44] For instance, northeast Thai will use the central Thai language and culture when in a bank setting, but in their villages will use the Lao language and culture for interaction (Smalley 1994).

insight that can and should be taken into account when dealing with the worldview of groups living in complex societies.

A fourth question that is raised is, "Can we know another group's or person's worldview?" The answer to this question is clearly, "No, not completely." But few scholars today would claim that a worldview description is more than an approximation (Kraft describes it as a "map"). For this reason, the discovery of how someone else sees the world must be done with caution, care, and proper humility (cf. Layton 1997:185). It also means that in writing a worldview description hermeneutical issues must be considered. Ethnographies are a specialized kind of literature (Geertz 1973). They are interpretations that are open to revision, and while this tells us that they are not absolute it does not mean that they are invalid.

A fifth issue is raised by postmodern scholars who claim that by beginning with the distinction between self and other, worldview theory excludes others "by another route." By "measuring the distance from the same to the other," worldview theory can radicalize differences until no point of comparison is left (Moore 1996:6). For some post-modern theorists, the emphasis on the distinction between the self and other is partly responsible for the politics of hate. They argue that all theories are inherently political and must be judged by their practical effects on the lives of people (Layton 1997:185).

This criticism is particularly valid when worldview theory is used to compare across cultures by taking a completely "objective" stance. Ricoeur suggests that we center the self "an equal distance from the cogito exalted by Descartes and from the cogito that Nietzsche proclaimed forfeit" (Ricoeur 1992:23). Geertz, as has been noted

already, seeks the same goal by calling on ethnographers to generalize from within cultures rather than across them (1973:26).

Conclusions on Worldview Theory

A worldview is a tentative description of the mental habits of a social group that provide the primary patterning--cognitively and psychologically--for perception of and for social relationships. Worldview is an analytical tool, not an ontological reality. The mental habits depicted by worldview descriptions are empowered by the religious (ideological) rituals of a society. (How ritual accomplishes this will be taken up in the next section.) The mental habits are stimulated in people by relatively structured symbolic systems. As they are enacted, these symbolic systems enable people to communicate the meaning of social action. The patterned responses and interpretations of experience that worldview descriptions portray occur in a dynamic world impacted by the larger environment, including the individual's physical body, physical environment, and social situation (see Figure 6).

Worldview descriptions may not always allow us to predict behavior, but it should be possible to demonstrate the connection between a people's social behavior and the worldview we attribute to them. Furthermore, while a group of people often hold several worldviews simultaneously, a worldview description should identify a group's primary worldview.

Finally, worldview descriptions should be done by reflecting back and forth between the worldlessness of structural analysis and the subjectivity of the author's participation in the social environment of the group in question. This latter stance calls

for comparison from within cultures and establishes an ethical obligation between the author of the worldview study and the people group whose perception is described.

Physical Environment

Social Relations

Physiological Influences

Affective Images

Physiological Influences

Social Relations

Physical Environment

Mental Habits Patterned for and by Social Life
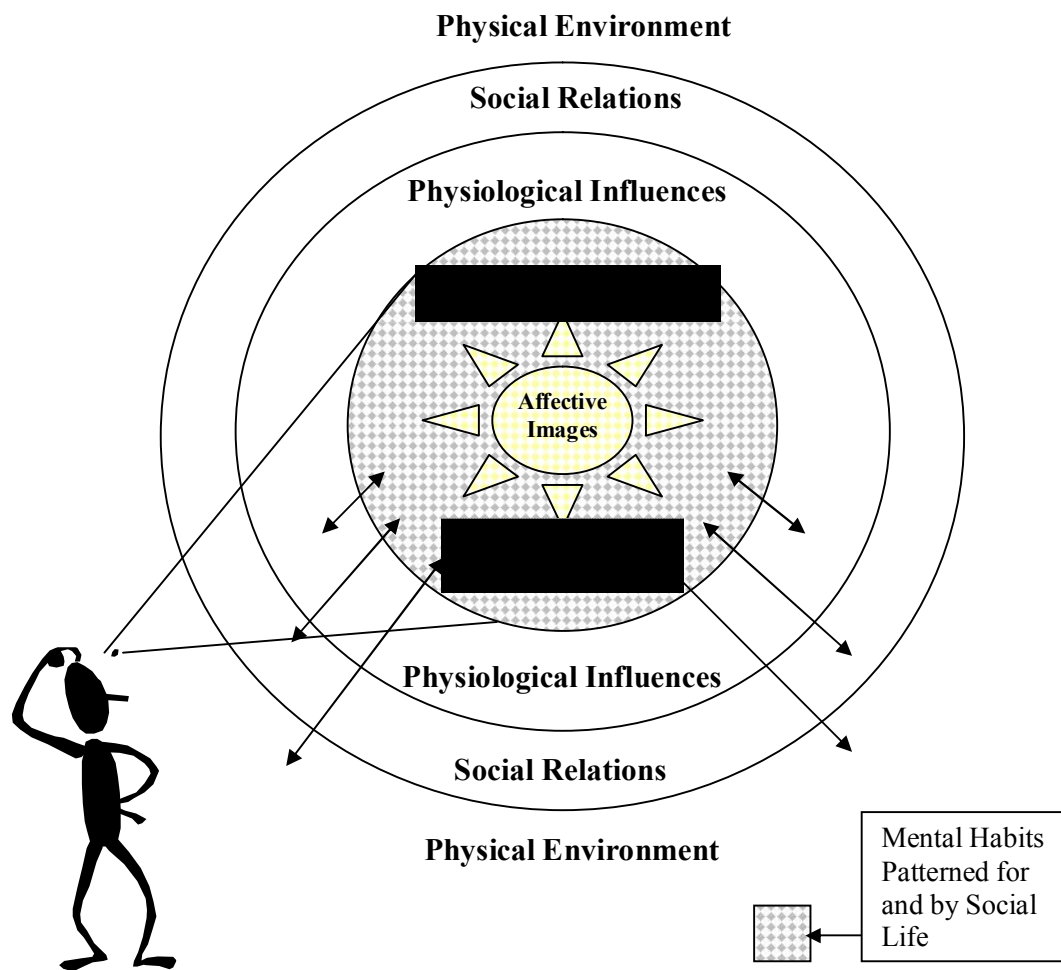
FIGURE 6

MODEL OF WORLDVIEW WITHIN CONTEXT

Summary

In this chapter I have attempted to establish a theory of interpretation of culture that is guided by interpretive theories that are focused on symbols and ritual, and that are

both product and process in orientation. The scholars reviewed all see a need to interpret symbols in terms of their structure. But they each press their arguments forward by suggesting that worldview be finally discerned from observing social action. The result, I believe is a better understanding of how to use worldview theory in a way that will lead to more valid interpretations.

The scholars discussed above have another thing in common. Each of them believes that the symbols in religious ritual act on and react to social relationships. Geertz states it best when he says that worldview is a model of and for social relations. But at its core, worldview is made powerful for the members of society in that it is enacted in ritual as representing the natural symbols of the cosmos. It is at this level that worldview stands on the authority of the sacred.

Worldview descriptions are not perfect maps of a society's mental habits of interpreting experiences. After the critique of postmodernism a worldview description is an attempt to interpret the experience of a group in the midst of the ethnographer's own worldview and experience with the group. Worldview descriptions are part of the attempt to understand and experience each other's worlds. It is a subjective project even if it makes tentative use of structural "objectivity." It is also a tentative project that is always open to revision. Finally, it is a very interpersonal project with an ethical dimension that has serious implications for communication strategies in Christian witness. This ethical dimension in worldview is taken up again in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

COMMUNICATION THEORY FOR CHRISTIAN WITNESS

In this chapter I review relevance [communication] theory as a means of building on the code model of communication theory. The way is prepared by first considering Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the subject, which provides a perspective on the interpretation of meaning in communication that matches the priority of relationships in Lao society. The crossroads between the context of the Lao PDR and the postmodern philosophy of Ricoeur lies in the perspective of beginning human knowledge in social relationships. Theories of communication that focus on the reflection of the autonomous, thinking subject reflecting on an objective world, (such as in code theory), are not capable of fully taking into account the way in which meaning is shared between people in Lao society (not to mention postmodern society).

Building on his hermeneutical method for reading texts, Ricoeur tells us that the interpretation of meaning is a social task. It is possible to understand this when we realize that knowledge of the other is just as primitive as knowledge of the self. Once this idea is taken seriously it will reposition the missionary in the task of communicating the gospel. It will push missionaries to move from seeing their task as "bringing the gospel," to one of testifying to the gospel in relationship (engagement) and re-encountering the gospel within the new social context.

The second section runs a parallel course to Ricoeur's, but works more directly within the field of communication theory. It focuses on the relevance theory developed by Sperber and Wilson (1995). Their theory challenges the assumption that communication happens primarily through coding and decoding information, and suggests that communication has more to do with the non-propositional communication of intention.

The discussion of relevance theory leads to a proposal for an incarnational model of communication that is used to address the Lao context in Chapter 8. At the center of this incarnational model of communication are two convictions. First, meaning is something that happens in people as they process experiences in the context of relationships. It is not something that can be handed off neatly and kept intact from one person to another. Second, in spite of this relocation of meaning, it is still possible to speak of some level of shared meaning due to the narrative structure of the gospel.

Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of the Subject

The impact of the hermeneutics of the subject is to ground communication in the ontological being of the subject. But this ontology is not the ontology of Descartes' idealism nor is it the deconstructed ontology of Nietzsche. Ricoeur has argued that in the philosophies of the subject there is either too much or too little of the *cogito*. His goal is to situate the subject between Descartes' idealism that founded the self as the first truth, and Nietzsche's total destruction of the self as a grand illusion (1992:4-16). While few Christian missionaries would accept the beginning place of Nietzsche's despair, most have come to rely on the false confidence proclaimed by Descartes' knowing subject.

Saying "I" Assumes "You"

Ricoeur begins his argument for approaching the subject through language, and shows us that references to the self in language depend upon the existence of a dialogical situation. To say "I" implies that there is a "you" or a "she" to whom "I" refers itself. Furthermore, references to the self have no meaning unless they carry the potential of being directed toward others. For instance, the meaning of a description of myself that was completely unique would be impossible to understand. That is why we say, "I am like this." Ricoeur states it as follows:

> [T]here is no self alone at the start; the ascription to others is just as primitive as the ascription to oneself. I cannot speak meaningfully of my thoughts unless I am able at the same time to ascribe them potentially to someone else: 'To put it briefly. One can ascribe states of consciousness to oneself only if one can identify other subjects of experience. And one cannot identify them to others if one can identify them only as subjects of experience, possessors of states of consciousness' (1992:38, quoted from Strawson 1959:100).

Ricoeur pursues his argument that language and meaning are born out of relational contexts by considering the theory of speech-acts. Speech-act theory focuses upon language as it is used "in specific contexts of interlocution" (or dialogue). The interest is on the rules that govern language use when the "reference attached to certain expressions cannot be determined without knowledge of the context of their use" (1992:40). At the level of interlocution, to say something is to say something to someone. Ricoeur explains, "I affirm that" is equal to "I declare to you that" (1992:43). At this level of speech, speaking is the same as acting. In the clearest case, speaking the words "I love you" not only conveys information but it changes the relationship between two people. Speech-acts, consequently, serve to link language to action.

There is another sense in which the subject speaking "I" transcends oneself. This can be seen in that while "I" refers to the speaker, "I" can also be taken up and applied by the reader to their self.[1] To read the words "I love you" presents the reader with an opportunity to take up the identity of the speaker. This is an important insight because it helps us to see one of the levels by which it is possible to say that meaning is shared.

Next, Ricouer takes up the "assimilation of the person of identifying reference to the reflexive, token 'I' . . ." on a more fundamental plane. This plane is found in the agent of action, "a being that comes into the world in the mode of incarnation." His reflection on the agent of action is later extended to a theory of narrative identity. "Ricoeur argues that we not only 'do' our actions but we 'say' them as well" (Klein 1995:351).

Who, What, and Why?

One way to approach human action is by asking the questions "When?" and, "What?" and "Why?" Human actions are distinguished from events in that they have intention. To ask about intention is to ask why an action has happened. But "Why?" questions assume "What?" questions and vice versa. To say what happened is to begin to explain, at least in part, why it happened. This dialectical relationship is equal to the one between explanation as description (what) and explanation as understanding (why). But there is more. The question, "Why?" cannot be fully dealt with unless the question,

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[1] A proper noun only escapes this openness through "naming" which anchors the act in speech to a particular person such as "Stephen" (cf. Ricoeur 1992:54).

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"Who?" comes into play.[2] Attempting to say why something happened suggests that the interpreter will also get around to saying who was responsible for what happened. This reveals the ethical dimension of all human understanding and identity.

To fail to assign action to an agent is to allow action to become an ontology of impersonal events. Structuralists and phenomenologists would prefer to deal only with the What? of action, believing that by avoiding the private psychological traits of intention, scientific description can be pursued more forcefully. But, "what distinguishes [human] action from all other events is, precisely, intention" (Ricoeur 1992:74).

"When we speak of the action, we ask who did it. When we ask for the motive, we refer directly to the agent" (Reagan 1996:82). One of the implications of assigning action to an agent is that by saying that an action depends on its agent, I am saying the action was "in the agent's power" (Ricoeur 1992:101). This power to act is rooted in the primitive experience of power. This is the human experience of knowing "I can act." It is rooted ontologically in the experience of the "lived body." This experience of "I can" (power to act) echoes the tension between desire and social norms (culture) that energizes human symbolism (Reagan 1996:82-83; Ricoeur 1992:110-112) and requires an ethical vision to moderate. Ricoeur later demonstrates that this vision is grounded in the utopian visions of a society.

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[2] Ricoeur argues that the reason philosophers tend to focus on answers to What-Why? rather than Who? questions is because of their preoccupation with the truth of the description of the content of action, at the expense of failing to assign action to an agent (Reagan 1996:81). When action is assigned to an agent it no longer poses the problem of truth but of "veracity." "Tests of sincerity . . . are not verifications but trials that finally end in an act of trust, in a final testimony, regardless of the intermediary episodes of suspicion" (Ricoeur 1992:72).

Ricoeur's discussion has now shown that all explanation and understanding of human action is driven from an understanding that is morally configured. His next step is to show that moral norms are rooted in a narrative identity that is rooted in a vision of the good life. It will be my own argument that this vision of the good can be associated with the Christian vision of the kingdom of God.

Narrative Identity

Thus far in the discussion I have demonstrated how Ricoeur approaches the subject from the perspectives of identifying reference and the agent of action in the semantics of action. But Ricoeur feels that the weakness of these approaches is the failure to address the fact that the "person of whom we are speaking and the agent on whom the action depends have a history" (1992:113). Personal identity can only be spoken of within a "temporal" context. His objective in arguing this way is to show that narrative theory is able to mediate between a descriptive point of view and a prescriptive point of view. The descriptive point of view was achieved through the perspective of the identifying reference of "I." The prescriptive (ethical) point of view was achieved through the unavoidable moral implications of answering the questions, "What?" and, "Why?" and "Who?"

Taking the narrative route the essential question then becomes, "Is there a form of permanence in time that answers the question, 'Who am I?'" This is the question of identity. Ricoeur says there are two models that can answer this question: "character and keeping one's word" (Ricoeur 1992:118). "In one sense, identity means sameness"

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(Reagan 1996:83). Identity as sameness reflects what we consider to be a person's character. But identity also means selfhood. Selfhood is established by keeping promises.

Character is "the set of distinctive marks which permit the re-identification of a human individual as being the same." It is "the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized" (Ricoeur 1992:119, 121). Character is what makes us think of identity as sameness. Character consists of habits that give a history to character, "but this is a history in which sedimentation tends to cover over the innovation which precedes it."[3] Second, character is a set of acquired identifications: values, norms, ideals, models, and heroes "in which the person or the community recognizes itself." There is an element of loyalty here. Through acquired habits and identifications it "is no longer exactly the 'what' external to the 'who' as was the case in the theory of action, where one could distinguish between what someone does and the one who does something." Now the question moves from "'Who am I?' back to the question 'What am I?'" Character "has a history that has been contracted . . . [but what] sedimentation has contracted narration can redeploy" (Ricoeur 1992:122).

The other model of permanence in time is keeping one's word in faithfulness. Keeping one's word expresses a self-constancy that can only be considered within the dimension of who? Ricoeur explains the uniqueness of this form of identity in the quotations below:

> The continuity of character is one thing, the constancy of friendship is quite another. . . . In this respect, keeping one's promise . . . does indeed appear to stand as a challenge to time, a denial of change: even if my

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[3] It is helpful to realize that Ricoeur is using the concept of character in much the same way that he uses the idea of structure in a text.

desire were to change, even if I were to change my opinion or my inclination, 'I will hold firm' (1992:123-124).

"To keep a promise is not to remain the same through time but to defy the changes wrought by time" (Reagan 1996:84).

Narrative identity, then, covers the two poles of identity. First, the pole of *idem* (sameness) identity as it is symbolized in a person's character by which a person is identified and re-identified. Character is the "set of acquired dispositions" and sedimented traits of a person. These traits remain the same from one time to the next. The second pole, *ipse* (self-hood) identity, is symbolized in the ethical notion of self-constancy (or keeping one's word). In selfhood identity, the self defies time by taking a stand in spite of changes to the context (circumstances, feelings, and so on) by keeping promises made to the other. Ricoeur writes, "the issue here is the ethical primacy of the other than self over the self" (Ricoeur 1992:166-168). Ethics in social relations has now emerged as an important key to the hermeneutics of the subject. Its importance in testifying cross-culturally will be expanded on in the final section of this chapter.

The Ethical Vision

"Utopia is the mode in which we radically rethink the nature of family, consumption, government, religion, and so on" (Ricoeur 1991:184). It is the opposite counterpart to ideology. Ideology is "a function of social integration. Utopia, in counter point to it, performs the function of social subversion" (1991:184).[4]

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[4] Utopia can become eccentric and lead people to actions that no longer deal with the reality of their historical situation. In this case it tends toward schizophrenia. Ideology, on the other hand, can move negatively toward concealment and distortion (Ricoeur 1991:186-187).

It is clear that Ricoeur is concerned with avoiding the pitfalls of ideology's influence on interpretation as much as possible. But it is also clear that he knows that the avoidance is never wholly successful. In fact, one of Ricoeur's intentions is to rescue ideology from the suspicion that has surrounded it. In discussing the positive role of ideology Ricoeur chooses to speak of "tradition." Tradition informs our approach to interpretation in negative and positive ways. Commenting on this, John B. Thompson writes:

> Ricoeur] argues that hermeneutics can no longer treat problems of method as secondary and derivative, as Gadamer tends to do; for we belong to tradition only in and through a distance which implies the possibility of objective analysis and critique. In turn, the critique of ideology can no longer claim to be animated by an interest which is wholly distinct from the governing principle of hermeneutics; for we can criticize the present only in the name of an ideal which acquires its content from the creative appropriation of the past (1981:20-21).

The creative appropriation of the past is driven by a society's utopian vision. This vision calls its members to evaluate its ideology. It is grounded in a view of the good life, and it is this view that shapes moral judgments. Ethics, defined by Ricoeur, is the aim of an accomplished life. It is the vision of the good life lived "*with and for others, in just institutions*" (author's emphasis, Ricoeur 1992:172).[5]

While ethics has a teleological aspect, in that it aims toward the ideal of the good life, morality is rooted in the practical norms that society agrees upon. Ethics encompasses morality because "morality is . . . only a limited, although legitimate and even indispensable, actualization of the ethical aim" (Ricoeur 1992:170). Our practices in

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[5] Ricoeur's follows Aristotle in rooting ethics in the desire for the good life rather than in duty, as Kant did.

any society are defined by rules, and as we follow these rules we appreciate the excellence and success of our actions. The opposite of morality is suffering.[6]

There are three important philosophical points to make here. First, ethics has primacy over morality. Second, the ethical aim is implemented through the grid of the moral norm. Third, whenever the moral norm finds itself in a paradox it refers to the ethical aim for guidance. With the counsel of wise and competent men and women, communities debate moral problems in light of the ethical aim and take moral action.[7]

In the end, this ethical vision of the good life lived on behalf of others is the summit from which Ricoeur views the identity of the subject. It is this goal that finally characterizes his philosophy as one built on the underlying category of hope (Madison 1995:89). Ricoeur comments on the link between narrative identity and ethics in the following statement:

> The theory of reading has warned us that the strategy of persuasion undertaken by the narrator is aimed at imposing on the reader a vision of the world that is never ethically neutral, but that rather implicitly or explicitly induces a new evaluation of the world and of the reader as well. In this sense, narrative already belongs to the ethical field in virtue of its claim--inseparable from its narration--to the ethical justice. Still it belongs to the reader, now an agent, an initiator of action, to choose among the multiple proposals of ethical justice brought forth by reading. It is at this point that the notion of narrative identity encounters its limit and has to link up with the nonnarrative components in the formation of an acting subject (1988:249).

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[6] Suffering in this technical sense is "the reduction, even the destruction, of the capacity for acting, of being-able-to-act, experienced as a violation of self-integrity" (Ricoeur 1992:190).

[7] This application of ethics to particular cases in the form of moral norms Ricoeur calls "practical wisdom." Practical wisdom is the "art of conversation, in which the ethics of argumentation is put to the test in the conflict of convictions" (1992:290).

I finish this section with a statement from Domenico Jervolino that summarizes Ricoeur's ethics:

> Like Bernano's curate, the difficult art of existence is distilled not only in (and thanks to) the love of one's neighbor as oneself but also in loving oneself as an other. This is the gift of finding oneself again after having lost oneself, an individuality which asserts itself beyond and without any egoism whatsoever. An ethical problem par excellence, but it may hold the key to some of the subtlest speculative aporias of the reflection on subjectivity (1995:356).

The hermeneutics of the subject approached indirectly through language suggests that identity and meaning are intimately linked and are created in social contexts. This changes the task from one that focuses on the translation of propositional truth cross-culturally to one that focuses on the relationship between the missionary and her audience, and their relationship together before God in the context.

Relevance Communication Theory

Relevance theory supplements Ricoeur's hermeneutical method by addressing the relational and contextual issues in the construction of meaning from the level of communication theory. It provides a significant critique of the limits of the code model theory that forms the foundation for most models of contextualization.[8] While relevance theory builds on code theory it goes further by taking up the inferences audiences make

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[8] Gilliland has defined contextualization as "the way in which the Word, as Scripture, and the Word, as revealed in the truths of culture, interact in determining Christian truth for a given people and place" (1989:10). My decision not to use the word contextualization is a critique of the assumption that missionaries actually can discern the supracultural from the cultural in the Christian faith. If the Word became flesh it means that the gospel came into culture in a comprehensive way. This struggle for preserving the supracultural truth of Scripture has been associated with what Gilliland and Bevans each refer to as the "translation" model of contextualization (Gilliland 1989:314; Bevans 1992:30-46).

regarding a speaker's intention to show the wider process by which audiences construct meaning from messages.

Code Theory

Since Aristotle communication theories have been based on the code model. In this model "communication is achieved by encoding and decoding messages" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:2). Kraft states, "Communication requires that there be a message, one or more people to whom that message is directed, and a messenger to take the message across whatever gap exists between the source of the message and the intended receptor(s)" (1995:10). This is represented in Figure 7 below.

The code model of verbal communication succeeds in explaining how the communication of thoughts is effected through utterances (see Nida 1990). The thoughts of the speaker are encoded linguistically as a message according to the grammar of the language being used and then spoken acoustically into the environment. The code is impacted in various degrees by environmental noise. The audience takes what they hear and decodes the message allowing it to form thoughts in their own mind. In this way, utterances are said to succeed in communicating thoughts (Sperber and Wilson 1995:6).

A message, Kraft says, can first be described in terms of its code. These codes, (or symbols), are arbitrarily chosen by a society to signify meaning. Second, a message can be described in terms of its content. A third aspect of a message is the style used by the communicator in presenting it. Fourth, a message is influenced by the relationship between the messenger and the receptor (1991:54).
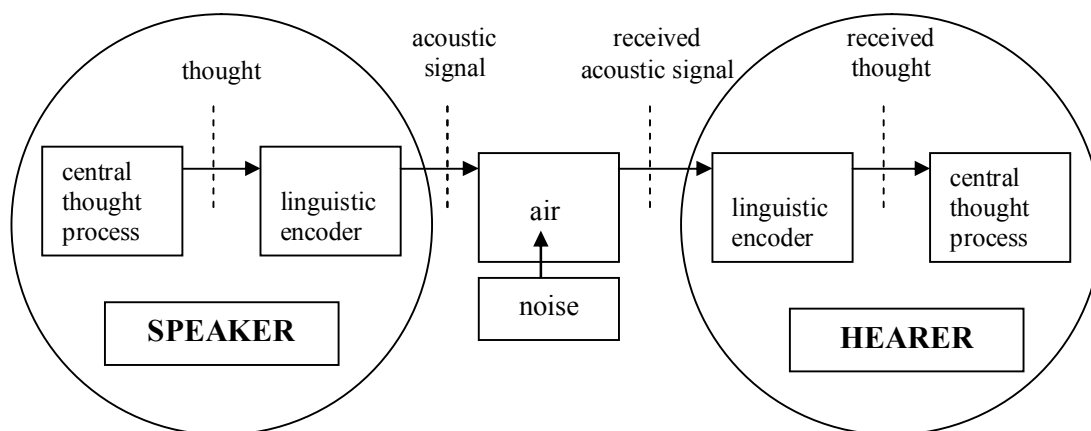
FIGURE 7

CODE MODEL OF VERBAL COMMUNICATION
(Sperber and Wilson 1995:5)

At the heart of the code model is the belief that meaning is constructed according to a system of signs structured in terms of their binary opposition to one another.[9] But Sperber and Wilson respond by saying that in spite of the promises made by structural linguistics, "no semiotic law of any significance was ever discovered" (1995:7).

Kraft's approach to communication acknowledges the significance of the role of the messenger in the effort to carry the message over the gaps between the speaker and the hearer. The role of the messenger is to understand the worldview of the receptor in

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[9] Lévi-Strauss saw several benefits to this approach. "First, structural linguistics shifts from the study of *conscious* linguistic phenomena to study of their *unconscious* infrastructure; second, it does not treat *terms* as independent entities, taking instead as its basis of analysis the *relations* between terms; third, it introduces the concept of *system*--'Modern phonemics does not merely proclaim that phonemes are always part of a system; it *shows* concrete phonemic systems and elucidates their structure'--finally, structural linguistics aims at discovering *general laws*, either by induction or . . . by logical deduction, which would give them an absolute character (Lévi-Strauss and N. Troubetzkoy as quoted by Lévi-Strauss 1963:33). The Prague School of structural linguistics organized in 1926. Their study of the structure of phoneme sets, which they discovered were built upon binary opposites, provided Lévi-Strauss with the insights he needed to apply this model to culture (McGee 1996:310).

order to code the message in ways that are relevant to the receptor. Significantly, Kraft points out that although the messenger is responsible to code the message, the receptor is the one who actually gives the message meaning (Kraft 1991:73).

Communicators must be concerned with how receptors construct meaning from the symbols in the message. According to Kraft, if a communicator can understand this process and learn to control the variables that are part of it, there is a better chance of the receptor constructing a meaning "dynamically equivalent" to the meaning intended by the messenger. Kraft realizes that to a significant degree the context determines how meaning is constructed in the mind of the hearer. He explains the process by which a receptor infers the meaning of a communicational event by appealing to worldview. In some regards, his work anticipates the work of Sperber and Wilson by locating meaning in the hearer and not simply in the code of the message.

In spite of the long reliance on the code model among communication theorists, many contemporary theorists today agree that humans "do not communicate by encoding and decoding thoughts" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:32). Nishioka, for one, says that the code model "overly emphasizes structural, synchronic, static, non-personal, and conventional aspects of human experience" (1997:124).

The code model does not, according to Sperber and Wilson, succeed in sufficiently describing how the encoded, mental thoughts of the speaker are understood by the hearer. Typically, the explanation offered is the assumption of "mutual knowledge" between the speaker and the hearer (1995:18). It is assumed that

communication takes place by means of common contextual knowledge.[10] The result in Kraft's theory of communication (developed for cross-cultural witness of the gospel) is a high emphasis on the need for the speaker to learn the worldview of the hearer. In this way, speakers take it upon themselves to learn and make use of the contextual knowledge of the audience in an effort to become competent in coding the message properly.[11]

An alternative to the goal of mutual knowledge is to base communication on common human experiences that all people share (e.g., birth, marriage, illness, death, and so on, 1995:17). Another is to focus on "mutual probablistic assumptions" (1995:20).

Sperber and Wilson reject the premise of "mutual knowledge" (1995:21). Complete mutual knowledge of the context is impossible cross-culturally and even between people of the same culture. "If you do not know that you have mutual knowledge (of some fact, with someone), then you do not have it" (1995:19).[12]

The Inferential Model

In this section I will review Sperber and Wilson's use of Paul Grice's inferential model of communication. Their goal is to improve on this model through the addition of the idea of "relevance."

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[10] "A context is a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:15).

[11] Given Kraft's use of the idea of dynamic equivalent meaning, it seems reasonable to suggest that he intended only to encourage speakers to gain a probable mutual knowledge with the hearer.

[12] From my vantage point it seems that in human communication there are always some things that a speaker shares in common with an audience, even if this is nothing more than their common humanity. It also seems to be true that there is always some knowledge that they do not mutually share, even if they have grown up in the same family all their lives.

Grice attempted to explain how "communication is achieved by the audience recognizing the communicator's informative intention" (as quoted by Sperber and Wilson 1995:32). "According to the inferential model, communication is achieved by the communicator providing evidence of her intentions and the audience inferring her intentions from the evidence" (1995:24). Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler define the act of inferencing as "The adding of one's own knowledge to bring a textual world together" (1981:6). There are normally missing pieces of information in a message that the speaker assumes are part of the audience's context.[13] When the text of a message is incomplete, the audience fills in the gap with information that they infer from what they feel is the intention of the speaker. Receptors do this by looking at the context of the communication, recalling previous communications with the same person, reflecting on their retrievable knowledge that seems relevant to the context, and relying on other contextual variables.

Interestingly enough, people are often unable to separate concepts activated by the text of the message from "concepts supplied for evident discontinuities" in the text. Ironically, people are more confident of what they have supplied to fill in discontinuities than they are of what they remember about the text itself (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981:102). Conversational "participants will infer unexpressed content rather than abandon their assumption that discourse is intended to be coherent, informative, relevant, and co-operative" (1981:123).

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[13] From this point forward the word "text" will refer to both a written text and a verbal communication that is remembered and interpreted for meaning by a receptor/audience (see Ricoeur 1991).

Grice, Sperber, and Wilson emphasize the role of speaker intention and hearer inference to such a degree that they are willing to suggest that communication is in some situations possible even in the absence of code (Sperber and Willson 1995:25).[14] They argue that there are two ways of conveying information.

First, a person can "provide direct evidence for the information to be conveyed" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:23). In this case, the evidence is explicit. A second, more common way to convey information is to provide "direct evidence of one's intention to convey it" (1995:23). For instance, if a person's intention is to please another person, and that person becomes aware of this intention, "this may in itself be enough to please" the first person, with or without a coded message. Sperber and Wilson explain this in a statement that cuts to the heart of their entire thesis on communication:

> Hearers are interested in the meaning of the sentence uttered only in so far as it provides evidence about what the speaker means. Communication is successful not when hearers recognize the linguistic meaning of the utterance, but when they infer the speaker's 'meaning' from it (1995:23).

Although communication can and sometimes does take place strictly through inference, Sperber and Wilson concede that most communication continues to rely on some use of code (1995:26). Rather than arguing that all communication is done through inference, they prefer to suggest that there are two communicational processes; one that is coding-decoding and the other that is inferential. Complex "forms of communication can combine both modes" (1995:27). Verbal communication is one form of complex communication that combines the two. Like Ricoeur, Sperber and Wilson argue that the

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[14] I will comment on this claim below when I consider the hermeneutical theory of Ricoeur in light of the inferential model.

linguistic meaning of an utterance is not the same as what the speaker means, even if the code does assist the hearer to infer the speaker meaning to varying degrees (cf. Ricoeur 1976:20).[15]

Decoding a message produces one more piece of evidence as to the speaker's intention in the communication. But the code does not equal the speaker's intended meaning. Beyond the code there are other ways by which a speaker uses the situation of the communicational context to convey their intention to communicate and the information they intend to communicate. In this sense, coding-decoding is subservient to the inference of the hearer. At the same time "much decoding is non-inferential" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:28).

The inferential model recognizes that the audience has a cognitive environment of assumptions that "the audience is capable of mentally representing and accepting as true." The intention in all communication is to alter the cognitive environment of the audience but understanding why an audience chooses to make inferences at all requires the introduction of another concept that Sperber and Wilson call "relevance" (1995:46).

Relevance and Ostension

The concept of relevance is the contribution of Sperber and Wilson to improving Grice's inference model of communication. Relevance is defined as the human aim to efficiently improve the individual's knowledge of the world (1995:46-47). Relevant

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[15] Ricoeur uses the idea of "sense" to refer to the literal meaning of the utterance in terms of the grammatical and lexical codes it contains (the structure of the utterance). He uses reference to address the meaning of the utterance as addressed to the context of the communication. Ricoeur sees the appropriation of meaning by the hearer as a creative task; a task anchored in but not bound by the meaning (intention) of the speaker.

information to an audience is generally new information that can be connected to old information usefully:

> When these interconnected new and old items of information are used together as premises in an inference process, further new information can be derived: information which could not have been inferred without this combination of old and new premises. When the processing of new information gives rise to such a multiplication effect, the greater the relevance (1995:48).[16]

Relevance is tied to the idea of "ostension" or, "behavior that makes manifest the intention to make something manifest." The connection to relevance is seen in that processing information requires work and humans do not normally put forth the effort for it unless a positive return can be expected. Behavior that demonstrates an intention to communicate assumes that the speaker feels that processing the information will be relevant to the audience (1995:49). In other words, "an act of ostension carries a [kind of] guarantee of relevance, and . . . this fact--which we will call the principle of relevance-- makes manifest the intention behind the ostension" (1995:50).

There are two levels of ostensive information. The first is the information itself, which is called the informative intention. The second is the information at which the first level of information was given intentionally. This is called the communicative intention.

But there is a twist to this claim. A speaker can fulfill her communicative intention without fulfilling her informative intention. In other words, it is possible to successfully make a hearer understand that you have information you want to convey without successfully conveying the information itself.

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[16] In similar fashion Ricoeur (borrowing from Gadamer) believes that all new horizons of perception are a fusion of old horizons and new possible horizons which are projected out of the interplay of structure--code--and being in the world--inference based on the cognitive environment (1981c:178). A similar argument is found in his description of the metaphorical nature of language as text (1976).

The Informative Intention

In this case, the informative intention is understood to be "an intention to induce in an audience the belief that a certain proposition is true" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:57). The informative intention asks the question, "What is communicated?" The traditional answer to this question has been, "Meaning is communicated." The next question that arises has been exceedingly more difficult to answer. That question is, "What is meaning?" Code model and semiotic scholars have answered this question by pointing to the literal semantic meaning of the utterance. Meaning is taken to be "a proposition combined with a propositional attitude" (1995:54-55).

What is not clear in the code model is how informative intention relates to non-propositional communications such as images, impressions, and emotions.[17] In this case it is important to see that an intention is a psychological state. In order to be communicated, the content of intention must be represented mentally. When a non-propositional meaning is the content of an informative intention, we should realize that in "a representation of a set of assumptions it is not necessary to have a representation of each assumption in the set" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:58).[18]

For instance, at the mention of the phrase *That Luang*, any Lao person would understand a certain collage of meanings associated with the biggest Lao festival of the year. Sperber and Wilson are saying that it is not necessary to communicate the meaning of each set of themes that Lao people remember in relation to this festival in order for

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[17] It is not difficult to see the way that this insight relates to Ricoeur's idea that meaning arises out of the metaphorical nature of language.

[18] This agrees with Nishioka's argument that worldview moves from psychological, whole configurations to relatively orderly, cognitive elements (1997).

them to share the manifest cognitive environment of the speaker of the words *That Luang*.[19] There does not need to be a propositional assertion in the mention of the festival. The mention of these words alone leaves a non-propositional impression that conjures up the past feelings of the person hearing them. The intention conveyed is broader and more varied than with a propositional intention.

The two poles between propositional and non-propositional meaning can be described as strong and weak communication. Sperber and Wilson explain as follows:

> We might think of communication itself, then, as a matter of degree. When the communicator makes strongly manifest her informative intention to make some particular assumption strongly manifest, then that assumption is strongly communicated. An example would be answering a clear 'Yes' when asked 'Did you pay the rent?' When the communicator's intention is to increase simultaneously the manifestness of a wide range of assumptions, so that her intention concerning each of these assumptions is weakly manifest, then each of them is weakly communicated. An example would be sniffing ecstatically and ostensively at the fresh seaside air . . . In the case of strong communication, the communicator can have fairly precise expectations about some of the thoughts that the audience will actually entertain. With weaker forms of communication, the communicator can merely expect to steer the thoughts of the audience in a certain direction. Often in human interaction, weak communication is found sufficient or even preferable to the stronger forms (1995:60).

The meaning of some informative intentions is vague and even at times without a code that can be deciphered. In fact, the intention of some provided information is to leave an impression that impacts mood, rather than to provide a proposition that changes the cognitive information in minds of the audience. More often than not, "what the

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[19] Sperber and Wilson's discussion of weak communication is better understood in the light of Turner's description of dominant symbols that are multi-vocal (in that they carry multiple levels of meaning) and difficult to explain definitively (cf. Turner 1985:57). De Beaugrande and Dressler use the idea of a "textual world." By this term, they wish to describe how various senses of meaning are put together into large configurations. It is an attempt to work in the opposite direction of structural atomization of all the individual senses of meaning (1981:87).

communicator intends to make manifest is partly precise and partly vague" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:59).

So how does this audience meaning relate to the speaker's intended meaning? The answer to this question will vary greatly, depending on the ability of the speaker to anticipate the inferences of the audience. At the very least, audience meaning is grounded in the textual inferences (lexical meanings, semantics, symbolic structure, and so on) made by the audience. At best, the informative and communicative intentions to communicate something are shaped by the speaker in order to address the manifest facts in the audience's cognitive environment. In the end, the meaning of a communication always belongs to the audience, and this meaning is never completely equal to the speaker's meaning. Listening is a creative event in which the information communicated by a speaker is connected to old information in the audience's cognitive environment. The combination of the two that results in meaning opens up new possible ways of being in the world (J. B. Thompson 1981:10-14).

The Communicative Intention

The communicative intention seeks "to make it mutually manifest to audience and communicator that the communicator has an informative intention" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:61).[20] The point here is that a transaction between two people can only be referred to as communication if the intention to communicate is made known to both. The absence

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[20] De Beaugrande and Dressler agree: "A language configuration must be intended to be a text and accepted as such in order to be utilized in communicative interaction" (1981:113).

of mutual awareness of the intention to communicate reduces the exchange of information to a lower level of interaction.[21]

Sperber and Wilson would concede that the absence of mutual recognition of the intention to communicate may still allow change to occur in the cognitive environment of the audience. But mutual recognition of the intention to communicate is important in that it allows for social interaction, and this interaction carries the possibility of a change in relationship between speaker and hearer. This is another way of saying that impersonal, propositional transfers of information do not allow for social interaction, and without social interaction the quality of communication decreases. Quality relationships between speaker and audience have a direct bearing on the acceptability of the informative intention. In fact, Sperber and Wilson imply that without them the existence of real communication is in doubt.

Cognitive Environments

Once the speaker's behavior has indicated to the audience that the speaker wishes to communicate information, then the audience immediately assumes that the speaker will meet "certain general standards" in the communication. This is what Grice called the "co-operative principle" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:33). It was his version of the mutual knowledge assumption upon which the code model is based. But Sperber and Wilson ask, "What form of shared information is available to humans?" (1995:38). They suggest that

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[21] This is an insight that tent-making missionaries need to consider. Many missionaries working in restricted access countries routinely justify their presence in a country with the argument that while they cannot overtly communicate the gospel their lives are communicating the gospel covertly. Sperber and Wilson's argument here challenges this assumption by asking whether the intention to communicate the gospel has been communicated to the audience yet.

a better foundation for communication is the concept of a cognitive environment made up of manifest facts. "An individual's total cognitive environment is the set of all the facts that he can perceive or infer: all the facts that are manifest to him" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:39). Here facts that are cognitively manifest and potentially manifest are part of the cognitive environment.

The idea of mutual cognitive environments is weaker than the claim to mutual knowledge, but better able to account for the psychological condition of the audience. First, it is weaker in the sense that it does not fully explain the co-operation between speaker and audience in communication. The code model can explain the co-operation because it assumes that communication is a symmetrical interaction between speaker and hearer. In the inference model, however, communication is understood to be an asymmetrical process, with the speaker taking the lead in the co-operation (Sperber and Wilson 1995:43). "It is up to the communicator to make correct assumptions about the codes and contextual information that the audience will have accessible and be likely to use in the comprehension process" (1995:43).[22] This, of course, speaks to the need for communicators to understand the worldview themes that pattern the cognitive environment of the audience.

Second, the idea of mutual cognitive environments is weaker in that it does not assume successful communication. In the code model, the idea of mutually shared knowledge allowed theorists to believe that if the speaker achieved mutual knowledge with the hearer and controlled the communicational environment, she could be sure of

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[22] Notice that Kraft has made a similar assertion regarding the role of the speaker (1991:67-80).

successful communication with her audience.[23] This confidence is not found in the inferential model. This is because meaning is achieved through the inference of the hearer, and this inference may be more, or less, than the meaning intended by the speaker.

Implications for Communication

Sperber, Wilson, and Ricoeur have all reconsidered the creation of meaning in light of the process of communicating. This is in contrast to approaches to the code model that have focused on the structure used to code communication.[24]

Below I list nine implications for communication from the discussion above.

1. In order for communication to take place, the speaker and the hearer need to be mutually aware of the intention of the speaker to communicate.

2. Communication is a social process and its effectiveness depends upon the quality of the relationship between speaker and audience.

3. Communication is an asymmetrical interaction between people in which the speaker takes the lead role (including taking on the task of learning the cognitive environment of the audience).

4. A communication is relevant when it is possible to tie new information to old information resulting in a combination that presents possibilities that are creatively unique to the audience's situation.

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[23] It is not difficult to see how evangelical Christians in North America, concerned with the accurate communication of the meaning of Scripture from one culture to another, would find it easy to support the code model.

5. Communication normally consists of a mix of propositional (precise) communication and non-propositional (vague) communication.

6. Weak (non-propositional) communication that uses images, pictures, and stories are often more effective in changing the cognitive environment of the audience than is propositional information.

7. The audience naturally fills in the gaps that they perceive in the "textual information" provided by communicators with non-textual inferences that are taken from their own cognitive environment.

8. The audience often has more confidence in their non-textual inferences than in the textual inferences they make based on the communicator's textual information.

9. Meaning is a creative act accomplished by the audience that is anchored in the structure of the intention of the speaker, but never equal to it.

Beyond Contextualization to Incarnation

The contributions of Ricoeur, Sperber, and Wilson together suggest important new directions for communicating the gospel cross-culturally that go beyond models of contextualization. They call for a move from the contextualization of information, (using the code model of communication), to the incarnation of a kingdom ethic in the person of Jesus Christ. I will now suggest an incarnational model of cross-cultural communication drawing on each of these authors, but using Ricoeur as the primary guide. At its heart, an incarnational model links the interpretative task of meaning in the cross-cultural

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[24] Nishioka refers to the latter as a "product theory" of communication (1997:196).

communication of the gospel to social identity. I want to expand on this at the ontological and the interpretive levels. [25]

The Social Orientation of Missionary Witness

The ontological level of the incarnational model speaks to the pre-conditions of the missionary's place in the world as it impacts communication. It demands that three things be recognized.

First, missionaries must recognize that their understanding of the meaning of the gospel rises out of their social context. This informs them that the meaning of the gospel cannot be made absolute. Neither can it be repackaged (contextualized) and passed on in another cultural context. Missionaries can testify to their encounter with God in the gospel of Jesus Christ and his kingdom. But the testimony of missionaries is in a sense always out of context, since it is evaluated in a context in which it was not born.

Even with our best efforts to learn about and become part of the local context, our testimony is experienced as one with discontinuities. In other words, local audiences sense that there are pieces that do not make sense in the local situation. Although audiences may follow the structure of the gospel story, they fill in perceived gaps using information from their own worldview. They dress the gospel in the world they live in, and the gospel sheds new light on their world as they interact with it. This is incarnation. It involves the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and minds of people as they wrestle with the witness of missionaries. This task requires that both local audience and

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[25] Others have used the incarnation as the model for contextualization (cf. Kraft 1979:173ff; Shaw 1988:14ff; Glasser 1989:33). My intention in not using the word contextualization is to try to fully escape seeing communication as largely dependent on coding and decoding. While the code model does explain an aspect of communication, the theories I am relying on for strategic communication are not centered there.

expatriate missionaries respond to the address of God in the social context in which they find themselves. The results are almost always surprising to missionaries, and often call for new experiences in their relationships with God.

Second, missionaries must realize their interdependence with the people of the society in which they testify. This interdependence takes different shapes, depending upon the structure of the social relations in the society. Understanding this interdependence allows the identity of the missionaries and the members of the local context to be validated. At the same time it establishes a dialogue about the gospel that will call for movement toward the challenge of the life of Christ and the ethic that his life established for his kingdom.

Third, missionaries must obediently respond to the ethical demands that the social context of witness carries. This ethical obligation should be guided and critiqued by the ethic of the kingdom of God established by the life of Jesus Christ. Worship of Jesus and action guided by the kingdom ethic are interdependent poles for meaning in the Christian life. Good communication always happens in covenant relationships. In this sense, the media--social relations--becomes the message (Christ lived and died on behalf of others).

Communicators of the gospel must face the reality that they always communicate within interdependent relationships that carry ethical obligations that were established by the cross of Christ. In this model, witness to the gospel requires the missionary to re-encounter God in the context of new social relations that are considered in light of the gospel story and the interpretive key of the ethic of the kingdom of God. All narrative is interpreted "based on an experience of an ethic already realized" (Kemp 1995:376).

The givenness of the subject then is not achieved directly as a foundational beginning place. Nor is Christ the beginning place from which witness begins. Rather both are arrived at indirectly through an ethical vision identified in the subject of speech, action, and narrative. Bert Hoedemaker has written in a similar but theological way in regard to the traditional, foundational place of Christ in post-modern theology and missions:

> Christian faith and proclamation may, and will, choose its foundation in the givenness of Christ; but a missiological reflection which takes the epistemological predicament seriously will highlight the eschatological dimensions of this foundation and urge the Christian faith to take these seriously. The result will be a missionary theology that works backwards, as it were, from eschatology to pneumatology to christology. Such a theology will not ignore the foundation but it will not use it in a 'foundationalist' way. That means that the givenness of Christ is a belief that does not stand by itself but derives its significance from the other beliefs to which it has come to be (and continues to be) connected in the construction of the Christian tradition (1999:221).

Interpreting the Gospel in Context

These ontological orientations have implications for the methodology used to interpret the meaning of cross-cultural communication. Below are aspects of the incarnational model of cross-cultural communication at the level of interpretation. The meaning of the gospel is a constructive task accomplished by local people in interaction with their previous encounters with God in their own culture, the narrative of the Bible, and the testimonies of missionaries, other faith communities, and the Holy Spirit. Ricoeur's philosophy calls for a model that interprets the gospel through a dialogical process in community. Table 13 represents the various aspects of the interpretive process. It attempts to take into account the ethical orientation of the ontology of the subject as well as Ricoeur's hermeneutical method (see Chapter 2).

The first row of Table 13 states the ontological condition of human interdependence. It is the social ground on which all interpretation of meaning is done.

The second row depicts the dialectical poles between which the meaning of the gospel is incarnated in each context. On the left side is the life of Christ that establishes the gospel in history. On the right side is the human vision of utopia or what Ricoeur calls "the good life." For Christians this takes shape as the kingdom of God. For most Lao this would probably be summarized in the word *khwaamsuk* (£˛¾´¦÷¡).[26]

Rows 3-7 describe the communicational context between expatriate missionaries and members of Lao society.[27] The physical environment and the social relations involved are the same for both but the context is read differently due to the different traditions (worldviews) of each party. These rows diagram the process by which M (a missionary or missionaries) and L (a member or members of Lao society) interpret their context that now includes each other. Each side has a structural-traditional-column and an action-encounter-column reflecting Ricoeur's insight that meaning arises out of the sense and the reference of discourse/action.

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[26] For the purpose of illustration I have chosen the context of Laos. *Khwaamsuk* in Lao means "happy contentment." It communicates the happiness of having what one needs to live in the context of justice and meaningful social relationships.

[27] A word of explanation is needed at this point in regard to my focus on the missionaries as opposed to the Bible. In keeping with the central place of social relationships in this paper, I want to argue that the gospel needs to be (and in fact is) communicated primarily by people and not simply by the text of the Bible. The Word must become flesh if it is to be understood meaningfully. "The product we are searching for is not even knowing God. Being in relationship with God is the objective" (Shaw and Van Engen 2001:284). If the gospel is located in the person of Jesus, then it follows that the meaning of the gospel will be communicated primarily through people. If we think about it, most of our "biblical theology" is based on the testimonies of what Christ has done in us and in the lives of others, not on careful exegesis of biblical texts (see Wagner 1996:46). Testimony and text are related in much the same way that sense and reference are in Ricoeur's hermeneutics. The testimony of the Spirit through others and in our own hearts plays a more significant role than many evangelicals want to admit.

TABLE 13

AN INCARNATIONAL MODEL OF COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL

1	**GLOBAL FAMILY UNDER GOD = SOCIAL– HERMENEUTICAL INTERDEPENDENCE**			

Two Hermeneutical Poles

Gospel of Jesus Christ ←————————————→ **Utopian Vision**

Life Incarnated	**Life in the Kingdom / *Khwaamsuk***
* Teachings	* Vision of the Good Life
* Death on the Cross	* Life Lived on Behalf of Others
* Resurrection	* In Just Institutions

COMMUNICATIONAL CONTEXT OF LAO PDR

Social Relations/Physical Environment
Reading within One Context but with Different Cultural Traditions in Mind

Missionary/ies		**Member/s of Lao Society**	
M's Tradition	**New Horizons** ←	→ **New Horizons**	**L's Tradition**
• Cultural	• Globalization	• Globalization	• Cultural
• Social	• Encounter with Lao's Culture	• Encounter with M's Culture	• Social
• Christian			• Buddhist-Animist
Cultural patterns	Actual social behavior	Actual social behavior	Cultural patterns
M "reads" the behavior of L as text	Actual behavior of M	Actual behavior of L	L "reads" the behavior of M as text

8 COMMUNICATIONAL EVENT

Proclaiming the Gospel in Word, Work, and Worship

	Encounter with Christ in Laos	**Encounter with Christ in Laos**	
Reading of Christian Gospel and L in context of Lao PDR	**New Horizons Opened**	**New Horizons Opened**	Reading of Christian gospel and M in context of Lao PDR
• Word	• Acceptance then fusion of horizons results in testimony (or)	• Acceptance then fusion of horizons results in testimony (or)	• Word
• Work			• Work
• Worship	• Rejection and return to old horizons	• Rejection and return to old horizons	• Worship

CRITIQUE OF CHURCH COMMUNITY IN LAO PDR

M and L Gradually Share a More Common Understanding of Christ in Laos
- Deeper understanding of their group's horizon and personal identity
- Greater ability to see and learn from horizons beyond their own group's
- Both horizons are changed by the experience with one another's horizons, and the horizons are opened up by the encounter with Christ.

Validation ————→ *Moral Action*

Or

Revision ————→ *Further Reflection*

Both M and L live within the meaning of their own cultural texts (Rows 4 and 5). Ricoeur speaks of tradition as ideology, but he does so taking into account the positive and negative roles that tradition plays in interpretation. Both sides are constantly encountering experiences that challenge and call for adjustment in how they understand their cultural identity in the midst of social experiences (represented by the column labeled "New Horizons"). The most common encounters that call for the fusion of horizons today in Laos are the impact of globalization, and encounters with people who have different cultural identities.

Row 6 shows cultural identity in contrast to actual social behavior. This is not unrelated to the new horizons in the Row 5. In fact, when social behavior is out of line with cultural identity, it is in large degree due to the impact of the effort to fuse old horizons with new ones that have been encountered.

The seventh row represents the understanding M has of L's actual behavior. M reads this behavior, not for what it is, but as a cultural text in terms of M's tradition. In the same way, L reads the meaning of the text of M's social behavior. It is important to note that their understanding of one another is based on the text they have compiled based on observed behavior, and this may or may not line up with what the other understands is the meaning of their behavior. For instance, in Laos it is not uncommon for acts of mercy done by a missionary to be interpreted by Lao people as the missionary's desire to gain merit, rather than as a witness to God's love in Christ.

The event in which the gospel is communicated is represented by the next two rows (8 and 9) of Table 13 which have heavy double lines on their outside borders. In this common-not common-context, M and L come to the text of Christian tradition (Row 9)

with their own identities and understandings of each other. There they read the text of the gospel as it is proclaimed by the church, in word, work, and worship. The word comes in the shape of the spoken and written testimonies to the gospel (missionaries, local Christians, Bible, and so on). The word comes to L in the shape of the actions that L associates with the church and the actions of Christians. Worship is experienced by L in the form of power encounter and the religious rituals of the church.

L interprets the "worldless" text in ways that allow the text to be incarnated in their world. As they do this, they encounter Christ in the Lao PDR. M hears this same proclamation even while M may be part of the proclamation, and is confronted with new ways of understanding the gospel and relating to Christ. This encounter comes as a critique of old ways of living in the world, at the same time that it opens up new possibilities in Christ.

M and L are then faced with a choice, to fuse their old horizons with the new one opened up before them in the text or to reject them (still in Row 9). For those that answer the call of the new horizons in the encounter with Christ, there is then the task of testifying to that encounter before others. This testimony comes as they give witness to one another of the incarnation of Christ among them. The giving of one's testimony before others demands that each one take into account the identity of the other, as best as they can. The effort to understand one another is motivated by the desire to live on behalf of the other, just as Christ lived and died on our behalf.

The interpretation of the incarnation of Christ is done within the context of the Lao PDR, but even more particularly, it is done within the hermeneutical community of the local church (Row 10). This task requires the critique of each side's unconscious

ideological allegiances. It also moves the missionary and the Lao audience toward a mutual understanding of one another even as each of their identities becomes more rooted in their relationship with Christ. These efforts result in a deeper understanding of personal identity in Christ and an increased ability to see the horizons of others.

In the community of the church, M and L are a part of the validation of each other's encounter with God in Christ. As validation is received the next step is to make decisions for moral action suited for the context. As stated above, these moral actions are shaped and critiqued by the eschatological view of the ethic of the kingdom of God that is founded by the cross. The encounter with Christ moves missionaries and the local Lao audience closer to the reality of living the good life within the realm of God's kingdom.

But these new horizons and decisions for Christian action are never final. Both M and L are called to reflect again and again on their culture, the faith and their ever new encounters with the risen Christ who comes to them through the mission of God in the world. Each time they will see new horizons of living with the king never before imagined even as they recognize the continuity of these visions in the faith of the church until we all:

> Have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge--that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:18-19).

Summary

In Chapter 2 I developed a theory of interpretation that is grounded in the social existence of the interpreter and considers the text of social action from a distance that critiques assumptions and opens up new worlds. The interpretations that result from this

model are trustworthy but tentative and open to revision. Interpreters of worldview can no longer see themselves as uninvolved observers. They are in the thick of their own descriptions and cannot avoid evaluating for long.

Ricoeur's ontology of the subject anchors the discussion on communicational theory for cross-cultural Christian witness. In this model of communication not only the words matter, but so do the identity and the social obligations of the speaker, in how the audience interprets the intention of the speaker's message. How these social obligations are organized and identity constructed in the Lao worldview is the subject of Part II.

PART II

***KHWAN* RITUALS IN LAO SOCIETY**

In Part II I analyze Lao *khwan* rituals as a means of describing Lao worldview themes that will be used in Part III to formulate communication strategies for Christian witness. In Chapter 4 I describe the larger social context within which *khwan* rituals are performed. I also consider the Lao religious ritual system and the literature on Thai and Lao *khwan* rituals. In Chapter 5 I analyze the data from my field research on *khwan* rituals. I interpret these rituals using Ricoeur's hermeneutical method.

CHAPTER 4

THE LAO SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The objective of this chapter is to describe the larger social-cultural context in which *khwan* rituals are performed. I argued in Chapter 2 that worldview themes are idealistic abstractions that seek to describe the patterning of the perception of a people's place in the world and their interaction with it. Along with Geertz, I see worldview themes as models of and for social relations. With this in mind, the first section below discusses several background issues to the larger social context of the Lao PDR. The second section looks at the structure of Lao society in more detail. The third section reviews the literature on the Lao religious ritual system that works to legitimate and empower this social structure. The final section narrows the focus to the literature on *khwan* rituals that are analyzed and interpreted in Chapter 6.

Background Issues

The background issues reviewed below reveal the vulnerability that generally characterizes the Lao perception of life. First, the Lao struggle to establish a sense of being a distinct ethnic group is considered. Second, the physical environment is discussed to demonstrate the conditions that have shaped the largely subsistence agricultural economy. Next, I discuss the largely foreign aid dependent economy and the cyclical poverty that makes living in Laos a precarious experience. The final section provides a

brief overview of the political history of Laos that helps explain Laos' geo-political role as a buffer state between larger Southeast Asian powers.

What It Means to Be "Lao"

As was stated in Chapter 1, the Lao are linguistically part of the *Tai-Kadai* language family found in southern China, northwestern Vietnam, Burma, northeast India, Thailand, and the Lao PDR (Diller 1998). Some of the common characteristics found among *Tai* speaking people are wet-rice agriculture, domestication of cattle and buffalo, the propitiation of spirits, or *phii* ("both nature and ancestor spirits"), the belief in *khwan* ("soul or life essence"), political organization in the form of *müang* (to be explained below), and "an hereditary aristocratic elite" that rules over "a free peasantry" (Stuart-Fox 1998:22; Nathalang 1997:57).

Today *Tai* speaking people make up about 65 percent of the population of 5.3 million in the Lao PDR (ASEAN Secretariat 2002a) and dominate the social and political environment. Evans argues that, from a historical perspective, the concept of a Lao people group cannot be limited to the boundaries of the modern state of the Lao PDR (1999:4, 28). There are, for instance, considerably more Lao-speaking people in northeast Thailand than in the Lao PDR.[1] Like the Thai, Lao scholars have attempted to organize their reading of the historical data in such a way that establishes a distinct history for Lao speaking people (in contrast to the Thai). But Evans feels that this historical evidence is sketchy and not clear enough to identify an ancient nation of Lao or Thai (1999:2-3).

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[1] The population of northeast Thailand, which is predominantly ethnic Lao, is more than 20 million people (Rogers 1996:54).

Today the communist government attempts to describe Lao culture as inseparable from Theravada Buddhism (1998:190).[2] This argument is also hard to sustain since the category of "Lao" can be broken down into: a) Sino-Vietnamese *Tai*;[3] and b) Lao oriented toward Theravada Buddhism and Brahman ritual (1999:15).

The nation of Laos has often been described as a creation of French colonialism. Evans argues that, except for the borders that French power established for Laos in 1893, the remnants of the Kingdom of Lan Xang would have been absorbed by the Thai and the Vietnamese (1999:21). But a national identity has, nevertheless, been slowly forming since the end of World War II. This national identity is primarily oriented toward the dominant Lao culture. The influence of Lao culture is having a significant impact even on groups whose first language is not Lao.[4] The people that this study is concerned with are the Lao who identify themselves with Theravada Buddhism in the Lao PDR.

Physical Environmental Context

The natural environment of the Lao PDR has four distinctive features. First, most of the land area of Laos is covered with mountains. Second, a seasonal cycle of monsoon winds brings an annual rainy season. This cycle shapes the Lao agricultural and ritual calendar. Third, the monsoon rains run into a series of large rivers that grow to flood size each year. The most significant of these is the Mekong River that runs 1,600 kilometers

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[2] See the discussion on the LPRP's effort to build nationalism on pages 173-175.

[3] For example, the *Tai Dam* (Black *Tai*), some *Tai D*ää*ng* (Red *Tai*), and *Tai Khao* (White *Tai*).

[4] The number of indigenous groups in the Lao PDR is hard to pinpoint. Estimates range from 68 to 130. See Chazee (1995) and Chamberlain, Alton and Crisfield (1995) for recent studies of the indigenous people groups in the Lao PDR. It should be kept in mind that to say that 65 percent of the people in Laos are Lao speaking is to include *Tai* speaking groups that are not Theravada Buddhist. Evans discusses whether or not these groups should be included in the category of Lao (1999:1-34).

through Laos. Unfortunately, the Mekong is not completely navigable, leaving the country landlocked and dependent on Thailand and Vietnam for shipping ports.

The fourth prominent physical feature is the large area still covered by forest. "About 60 percent of the country is estimated to be covered with dense tropical forests, and only about 10 percent of its area is considered arable" (Otani and Pham 1996). These forests have traditionally provided a substantial number of natural resources (including food) to local populations. The forests, (which contain several valuable hardwoods), are threatened today by lumber companies. There are some efforts at reforestation and also conservation of several endangered species of plant and animal life.[5]

The physical environment of Laos allows the Lao to farm paddy and upland rice as their staple food. But when rainfalls are insufficient or result in floods, farmers are often unable to harvest all they need for the year. The Lao PDR has depended on foreign grants of rice numerous times in recent years.[6] The kitchen gardens and food products gathered from the forests provide supplements to the Lao diet but the rapid depletion of forests and wildlife are adding to the hardship of dealing with bad harvests.

<div align="center">

Economic Context

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Any description of the Lao PDR makes note of its general poverty. The annual per capita income is roughly $350 US and more than half the gross domestic product comes from subsistence farming (*Asia 1998 Yearbook* 1999:12-13). Although some

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[5] See Stuart-Fox (1986) and Whitaker, Barth, Berman, Heimann, MacDonald, Martindale and Shinn (1971) for more details on the physical environment of the Lao PDR.

[6] See Chamberlain, Alton, and Crisfield (1995:49) for statistics on rice production shortages from 1991 to 1995.

medical workers in the country suggest there is evidence of insufficient nutrition among children, poverty in Laos is not normally characterized by hunger.[7]

Lao society has been dependent upon foreign aid since the early days of French colonial rule (Stuart-Fox 1986:105). More than 16 percent of the gross domestic product comes from foreign aid (*Asia 1998 Yearbook* 1999:12-13; Lintner 2001).[8] Beyond this dozens of government, international, and private non-government aid agencies operate in the country. The Lao government mandates that even the small non-government agencies spend over $100,000 US on direct project expenses.

The poverty of Lao people is more acutely felt in the areas of health and education. Traditionally, health care was provided in one or more of the following ways: traditional medicine from an herbal doctor *Maw Yaa Phüünmüang* (Ïð-µ¾-²œ--À´õº¤),[9] a combination of incantations and traditional medicine provided by a shaman known as a blow doctor *Maw Pao* (Ïð-À¯‰¾), and/or appeasement of spirits through sacrifices or offerings made by a spirit doctor *Maw Yao* (Ïð-Àµö¾). Today the Ministry of Public Health, with assistance from international aid agencies, is extending western medical systems throughout the country. Despite these efforts, the "life expectancy at birth for men and women in Laos was estimated in 1988 at forty-nine years, the same as in

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[7] Father Leria, a Jesuit who arrived in Laos in 1642, observed even then that the Lao typically had more than enough to eat (Stuart-Fox 1998:95). "Although nutrition appears to be marginal in the general population, health surveys are of varying quality. Some data indicate that stunting--low height for age--in the under-five population ranged from 2 to 35 percent, while wasting--low weight for height--probably does not exceed ten percent of the under-five population" (US Library of Congress 1994a).

[8] Bi-lateral aid promised for the period 1997-2000, was a total of $1.2 billion US. Of this amount, $640 million US were outright grants (UNDP 1997:58). The total GDP in 1998 was 1.76 billion US dollars (*Asia 1998 Yearbook* 1999:12).

[9] The Lao typically know the medicinal value of many plants and animal parts. Seeking the assistance of an herbal specialist would typically be done only when the household's knowledge of such things was exhausted. Village monks often double in the role of herbal medicine doctor.

Cambodia but at least ten years lower than in any other Southeast Asian nation" (USLOC 1994a).[10]

Monks in the village temple traditionally provided education to boys who served as novice monks. Literacy was connected to the reading of sacred texts in the village and of government documents in larger organizational life. As a result of this connection, literacy has been associated with religious and political power. Today, the educational system reaches most villages, but the majority of Lao receive on the average only six years or less of formal education.[11] The literacy rate among adults is not precisely known but it is assumed to be low. Even those who can read rarely do.[12]

In short, the economic context creates a society that is extremely vulnerable to exploitation, illness, and death compared to people in more prosperous nations. They are vulnerable to the difficult terrain, weather conditions, sickness, to those who have the power of the written word, and to political and religious powers. The forest in times of trouble has been a resource of food and spiritual power that can be drawn upon for survival. But at the same time, the forest represents to the Lao an undomesticated

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[10] "Whereas the infant mortality rate for Vientiane was about 50 per 1,000, in some remote rural areas it was estimated to be as high as 350 per 1,000 live births; that is, 35 percent of all children died before the age of one" (US Library of Congress 1994a).

[11] See the figures for children in school in each province and the populations of each province for the 1992-1993 school year (Chamberlain, Alton, and Crisfield 1995:53-55).

[12] In a survey in Vientiane Municipality, where literacy is highest, 61 percent of respondents said that they had not read even one book in the last year. Among those who had read a book more than half had read a Vietnamese language book. This suggests the possibility that most of those who read a book at all were ethnic Vietnamese not Lao. If this is true then in Vientiane only 20 percent of the Lao population had read a book in the past year (*Institute for Cultural Research* 1999:34-35). Some estimates of adult illiteracy are as high as 42 percent, and female illiteracy as high as 67 percent (Otani and Pham 1996). Of course a complicating issue is the general lack of available reading materials for the general public (Lockhart 2000).

resource of strength. It is a powerful but precarious ally and cannot be presumed upon. This idea will be developed further when the Lao ritual system is considered.

Political Historical Context

The Lao PDR has the smallest population and the least political clout of any nation in Southeast Asia (Stuart-Fox 1986:1). As noted above, historians typically describe Laos as a creation of French colonial power and a buffer state between powerful neighbors (Toye 1968; Stuart-Fox 1996).

The Lao migrated into the land area of Laos from southern China and Northern Vietnam (Edmondson 1998:1). With the rise of the Kingdom of Lan Xang in 1353 the Lao formalized and expanded the Lao *müang* political system that prevailed until French colonial rule, but its influence is still felt today.

Müang kingdoms in Southeast Asia, influenced by Brahman concepts of royalty and cultic rituals appeared in this era due to the surplus of rice. Surplus rice harvests resulted from managed irrigation systems.[13] In Laos, however, the mountains left little opportunity for large irrigation systems and the Lan Xang state was never afforded the large surpluses of rice that the Khmer and the Siamese enjoyed (Stuart-Fox 1998:50). This may help account for the relative independence of Lao villages in relation to their ruling *müang* lords. It may also be partially responsible for the regional nature of politics in Laos' history.[14] *Müang* politics were characterized by hierarchical systems of

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[13] See Stuart-Fox (1998:13f), Surareks (1998), and Kato (1998).
[14] Several significant rival monarchies emerged in Luang Prabang (1353), Vientiane (1698), Champasak (1713) and Xieng Khuang (the last being the *Phuan* Kingdom). See Stuart-Fox for details of the main three monarchies (1998:147-150).

concentric power largely defined in terms of the populations that acknowledged and paid tribute to them, and to a lesser degree by the territory they controlled.[15] Certain populations paid tribute and pledged allegiance to more than one *müang* power.

Historian Martin Stuart-Fox explains that the Kingdom of Lan Xang established by King Fa Ngum came to the peak of its power during the reign of King Surinyavongsa who ruled from 1638 to 1695 (1996:1). Before his reign, there were reoccurring invasions by the Burmese and Lan Xang was forced to pay tribute to Burma for a period of time (1998:77-86). After the death of Surinyavongsa the Kingdom divided because of multiple claims to the throne. The three principalities that emerged were Luang Prabang in the north, Vientiane in the Central Mekong region, and Champasak in the south.[16] This situation left all three principalities vulnerable to the power of Siam and eventually all three came "within the tributary orbit of Bangkok" (1996:1). From the beginning of the eighteenth century until the end of the nineteenth century Siamese power dominated Lao politics but there were other invasions and skirmishes with the Burmese and the Vietnamese during this period as well (1998:77ff).

French colonial rule extended from 1893 until the declaration of independence by Lao nationalists (April 1945) that greeted the end of World War II.[17] The refusal of the French (and the Americans) to recognize Laos' independence pushed key nationalist

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[15] Lucien Hanks' discussion of a concept of "circles" in Thai society is related to the concept of *müang* but places it in a modern, bureaucratic context (1975: 202ff).

[16] According to Evans, the Vientiane monarch was annihilated during the Siamese invasion in 1827-28. The *Phuan* Kingdom in Xieng Khuang (not mentioned above) was destroyed by Chinese warlords in the late nineteenth century. In the south the Champasak Kingdom was rendered powerless by the Siamese invasion in 1828 (Stuart-Fox 1998:90). The monarchy in Luang Prabang survived until it was destroyed by the communists in the 1970s.

[17] Technically speaking, the French voided the declaration of independence and re-instated a different version of French rule until 1953 (Lockhart 2002).

leaders to join the Indochina Communist Party. For the next thirty years the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) fought, (with help from Vietnamese communist soldiers), against French, US, and Thai backed Lao Royal military forces. During the 1960s and early 1970s, US bombing raids left a terrible legacy of death and destruction in an effort to keep communist forces at bay. Even today thousands of unexploded bombs remain in the countryside. Each year a handful of villagers are killed or maimed when they accidentally strike unexploded ordinances while farming.

On December 2, 1975, the Lao PDR was formally established by political vote in Vientiane when non-communist members in the coalition government fled in fear of a communist military victory. Following the Vietnamese lead, the Lao communist party initiated a drive toward socialism through collectivized agriculture in the late 1970s. The project failed miserably (Evans 1990:44-64). The economic failure of this campaign and the "re-education" of thousands of former Royal government employees resulted in roughly ten percent of the population leaving for Thailand's refugee camps (Van-es-Beeck 1982). In 1986 the LPRP approved the "New Economic Mechanism" (NEM) policy and slowly opened the doors to more western aid and investment. In the 1990s, the word "socialism" was quietly replaced in the national motto with "prosperity," a signal of the government's approval of the free market system.

The Lao PDR is organized in terms of the LPRP, the Lao Front for National Reconstruction and the various government ministries. The first twenty-seven years of rule by the LPRP have been marked by the first independent attempt to build a sense of Lao nationalism, a re-affirmation of Laos' diverse ethnicity, the special relationship with

Vietnam (to the concern of China) and continued economic underdevelopment (M. Brown and Zasloff 1986:268-274).

Today the government is again taking measures to limit the number of foreign organizations in the country and their access to the population. Foreign investment is drying up and the World Bank, upset with current economic policy, has slashed its assistance in half (Lintner 1998a, 2001; Mitton 1999a). The fall of the Thai currency (*Baht*) with other Asian currencies in 1997 revealed the vulnerability of the Lao kip to the fluctuations of the world economy (Linter 2001). The Hmong resistance movement left over from the Indochina War era continues to be a thorn in the flesh to the government and fuels fears of a western plot to destabilize communist party control of the government (Lintner and Crispin 2000).

Lao Social Structure

This section describes the structure of Lao society in terms of "older to younger" relationships *ai nawng* (ºÉ¾¨--Éº¤), the household *langkhaahüan* (Íñ¤-£¾-À»õº-), the village or *baan* (®É¾-), nation or *müang* (À´õº¤), ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations (¡÷È´-º¾-§¼-), and the foreign community *khon taang pathāāt* (£ö--ªÈ¾¤-¯½-Àê©). These Lao (insider) categories (and their associated Lao words) reveal how the Lao perceive the structure of their social relationships. Below each of these categories is described. Their importance will come to forefront in Chapter 6 when worldview themes in *khwan* rituals are shown to reflect and shape this social structure.

Identity as a Web of Relationships

In the Lao view a person *khon* (£ö-) is made up of a physical body *haangkay* (»È¾¤¡¾¨), a psyche *chid* (¥ò©), a soul or life essence *khwan* (¢¸ñ-)[18] and a spirit *vinnyaan* (¸ò-¨¾-). But other non-tangible elements that the Lao speak of are a person's personal power *lid* (ìò©), wisdom *pannyaa* (¯ñ--¨¾) and their personal merit or virtue *khun* (£÷-).[19]" The body is understood in terms of its directional space. The head (high) is where the non-tangible human elements reside and so it is considered sacred, while the feet are considered unclean (low). When a person's head is touched by another person it often causes offense. The feet are kept out of the way during social interactions. The right side of the body is more auspicious than the left. In ritual situations a woman should sit on her husband's left side, with her head lower than his.

Lao people do not normally see themselves outside of the web of the relationships to which they belong. To ask a Lao person for their life history is often to prompt a response that tells the story of that person's family. The family is conceived of as those who live in the household compound and by extension, matrilineal relatives in the village.

Lao relationships are structured in three fundamental ways (Ruohomäki and Sparkes 2000:19). First, and the most dominant category, is that of "older to younger."

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[18] Among ancient *Tai* people *khwan* was used to indicate a person's soul but the Theravada Buddhist Lao distinguish between the soul, which they refer to with the Pali word, *vinnyaan*, and *khwan*. *Khwan* can be translated as "ego, soul, morale, grace or prosperity" (Terwiel 1994:42).

[19] Heinze also mentions *chai* (.9) which is the *khwan* of the heart and associated with feelings, *ming* (¸yj') which is a Chinese loan word that refers to a person's fate, *chitaphud* (9yf8tr55f) which refers to the soul as shadow, *nidsai* (oyf.l) which refers to character, *phom likhid* (I am not aware of the Lao word here), which refers to the accumulated *karma* in a person's life, and *phii* (zu) which is the spirit of a dead person (1982:18-21).

The second category deals with gender and might be called "male and female groups." The third category is the distinction between those with ritual knowledge and those without ritual knowledge. Below I discuss each of these social categories.

Older to Younger Relationships

Lao social relations are consistently structured in a patron-client model referred to as older to younger[20] relationships (see Figure 8 below). In the village "seniority is a simple function of age" (R. B. Davis 1984:69) but in urban areas education, wealth, and occupation play a role in determining who is the "older" one in the relationship. So in some cases a person who is biologically younger than another will be referred to and play the role of the older one in the relationship; when this happens the power of the younger person puts the biologically older person in a subservient role to the younger person.

It is not always clear in these relationships whether it is more strategic to be the younger dependent one or the older one to whom obligation is due (cf. Pye 1985:133-157). Group cohesion depends on status inequality:

> It is difficult for an equal to give anything of value to an equal or to command his "respect." Indeed he stands as a potential competitor for favors. Group solidarity requires . . . framing unambiguously the relative rank of each [member] (Hanks and Phillips as quoted in Pye 1985:99).

At the same time status inequality is opposed by the value of personal self-reliance taught by Buddhism. These values are mediated by ritual acknowledgement of one's place in older to younger relationships. The older to younger dyad structures not

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[20] *Ainawng kan* (ºÉ¾¨--É°¤-¡ñ-) in the case of the older being a male or *üay nawngkan* (À°œº¨--É°¤-¡ñ-)
in the case of the older being a female. The gender of the younger one can be specified as well but often is not since the attributes of the older one in the relationship are more important.

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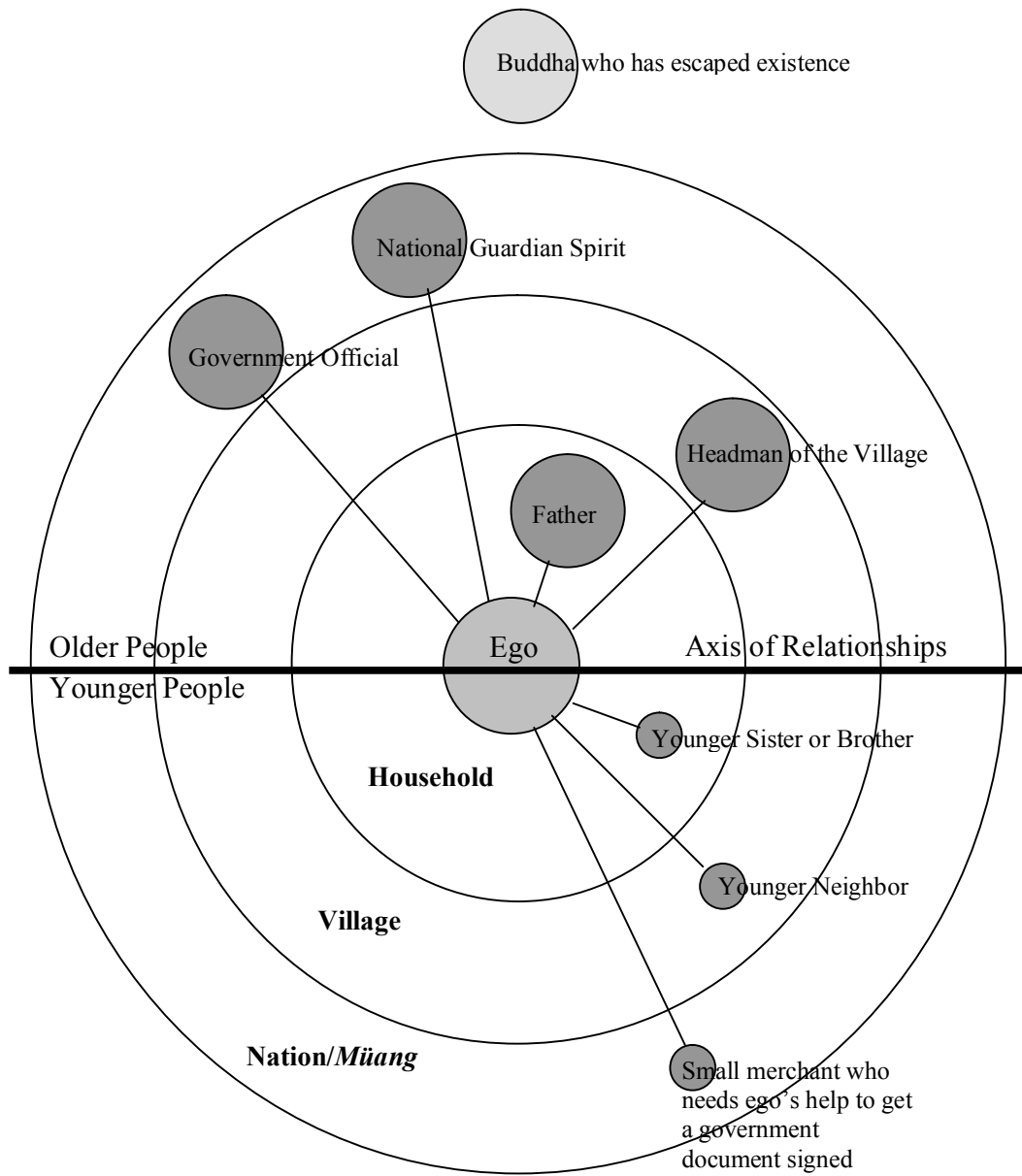
FIGURE 8

THE WEB OF LAO RELATIONSHIPS
(Adapted from Che-Bin 1989)

only Lao society but also Lao cosmology. Even the spirits (and gods) must ritually pay respect to the older and be aware of responsibility to those younger.

The structure of these relationships is established and reinforced through the use of kinship terms that define the older to younger relationship. The importance of acknowledging this relationship when interacting with someone can be seen in that the first questions asked of a new acquaintance are ones that will identify their status relative to the new person.[21] It is also a great insult to be told that you don't know who is older and who is younger in respect to yourself (®Ò-»øÉ-²†-®Ò-ëøÉ--Éº¤).

Lao kinship terms are generational and intra-generational (R. B. Davis 1984:69).[22] The role of the older is to instill confidence (¡¿-Ìñ¤-Ã¥) and provide for (À®…¤-Á¨¤) the younger side. Obligation (»øÉ-®÷--£÷-) is paid by the younger through obedience and careful consideration to not take unnecessary advantage of the older one's concern for the younger (À¡¤-Ã¥).[23]

Older to younger relationships empower Lao people to overcome the obstacles of life at social and spiritual levels. They are a means for dealing with the unyielding law of *karma* and institutional laws. Buddhist teaching on *karma* says that everyone receives what they deserve (À»ñ©-©ó-Ä©É-©ó). In a similar fashion rules are applied without

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[21] What Mont Redmond says about the Thai holds true for the Lao: "Only the poor are forced to put their character on the table as their best commodity. Position, not personality, is the trump card Thais love to play first" (1998:150).

[22] Tambiah breaks down generational terms in six categories. Blood brothers and sisters (ºÉ¾¨-Àºœº¨--Éº¤), first cousins (ìø¡-²Ò-²†--Éº¤), classificatory siblings and second cousins (²†--Éº¤), distant relatives (²†--Éº¤-¨¾©-¹È¾¤), non-kinsmen, other people (£ö--º^-), and unknown outsider (£ö---º¡) (1970:17-18).

[23] While the term *kāāngchai* (À¡¤-Ã¥) is used by the Lao, they more frequently express this concept with the word *yaan* (µÉ¾-). This identifies the attitude with the feeling of reverent fear.

mercy to people without established older to younger relationships in the right place and at the right time. Those in a younger position can manage the powers over them through ritual offerings in order to create opportunities that *karma* and a weak social position do not allow.[24] They may also play one older relation off another.

Male and Female

Male and female categories are carefully delineated in social roles and space. This gender opposition is also reflected in the religious ritual system, in that while women can fill the role of spirit medium, they generally do not act as ritual specialists. The spirit medium known as *Naang Thiam* (-¾¤-ê¼´) operates out of her home, and is concerned with diagnosing and healing illness caused by a lack of respect for household morality (Xayalat 2001; Wechkama 2001; Somchit 2001). This morality is structured around respect for the female ancestral line. Traditional values consistently favor men for formal leadership roles. This is true in the government and the "Buddhist Sangha (or monkhood)." But informally, women take the lead in business endeavors, and in some cases can perform *khwan* rituals if no male specialist is to be found.

The association of women with the household and social morality functions in a way parallel to the morality associated with men in their roles as monks and civic leaders. Women, however, are considered to be a threat to the power of men, and many Lao believe that should a woman come in contact with a Buddha image or amulet it will lose its power:

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[24] In the end, however, the Lao believe that *karma* is the final cause of everyone's fate.

This thinking is still demonstrated by the taboos that guide the washing and the drying of clothing. Preferably, feminine clothing should not touch or be on the same line with male clothing. Moreover, feminine clothing should never by hung to dry above the head of a male. Similarly, a female

overstepping a male is thought to be highly inauspicious for the male concerned, and an insult of his power (Mulder 1979:120).

In the Buddhist temple women have clearly defined roles in the support of male monks, through providing food and new robes to them as needed. Women may not sit next to, touch, or directly hand anything to a monk. In a similar way, women and men sit on separate sides of the church sanctuary while attending worship services in the Christian churches. In most village meetings that I have attended in the countryside, women sit together and share and form opinions together, while men do the same with men. In northern Laos, many homes are constructed with a male entrance and a female (and child) entrance to the home. In some northern Lao villages, homes are built with two hearths, one for women to use for cooking and the other for men to gather around to sleep nearby and to receive guests.

Women are by far the most active lay people in the temple ritual worship, but only men can become monks. At the same time, men are said to become monks at least once in their lifetime (even if for a short time) in order to gain merit for their mothers. In a reciprocal way, mothers are seen as the origin of the male monk who is her son. H. Leedom Lefferts reports a dramatic ritual display of this reciprocal relationship between mothers and male monks. During the ordination of a monk in Xieng Khuang, the monk's mother walks behind him holding his robes. Outside of this ritual moment women never touch monks:

> The monk whose mother walks behind him is also above her. Just as every person must be born of a woman, this monk precedes and is elevated above the woman who bore him. He moves along at one level on a path

while she moves along at another level. Although behind him, his mother remains with him, exercising a connection to him. Contained in this event, then, are the open expressions of two kinds of power. On the one hand, there is the power that comes through the teachings of the Buddha, which

are perpetuated through the line of members of the *sangha*. On the other hand, there is the power of origin and lineal descent, codified through the presence of a monk's mother, without whom he could not be where he is (1999:220).

Ritual Experts and Laity

A third category that is operative in Lao relationships is the distinction between people who have ritual knowledge (normally men) and those that do not (normally women, children, and young men). Most men become monks when they are young, before they marry, as part of fulfilling their duty to their parents. While they are in the temple, they learn to chant Buddhist scriptures in *Pali*. The chanting of these Pali texts is used to empower many Lao rituals and to bless the laity. The monks also learn how to perform sacred Buddhist rituals. B. J. Terwiel writes the following in regard to the lack of access women have to ritual knowledge:

> From the time of their earliest education, little girls are admonished to maintain a distance between themselves and the monks. They are excluded from becoming [child assistants in the temple] and also from joining the novices. The most powerfully charged amulets are out of their reach and no tattooer is prepared to give them permanent religiously charged markings. At the time that their male age-mates join the order, young women have only indirect access to religious knowledge. . . . It is . . . only when women are past the childbearing age and when they are less attractive sexually that they are able to obtain detailed religious knowledge. Many older women join the devout older men on sacred days during the Lenten season and adhere to the eight vows. During these periods of asceticism they too can learn to recite Pali texts, meditate, and participate in discussions about religious topics (1994:243).

Ritual experts are largely operative in the sphere of religion, and in Laos, religion is focused on physical well-being and the memory of the ancestors. Table 14 shows a list of some of the more important ritual specialists in Lao society.

TABLE 14

LAO RELIGIOUS RITUAL SPECIALISTS

Ritual Specialists	Major Ritual Area	Gender	Social Levels Addressed
Khuubaa (Monk) £ø-®¾	Buddhist rituals	Male	Individuals, household, village, and nation
Cham ¥¿	Guardian Spirit rituals	Male	Village or m*üang* (city)
Maw Phawn Ïð-²º-	*Khwan* rituals	Male	Individuals in the household (Monks at the temple)
Maw Yao Ïð-Àµö¾	Evil Spirit rituals	Male	Sick individuals
Maw Duu Ïð-©ø	Astrology	Male	Individuals who need guidance regarding the future
Nang Tiam -¾¤-ê¼´	Ancestral Spirit medium	Female	Individuals who hope to restore good fortune and/or health.
Maw Pao Ïð-À¯‰¾	Healer who uses herbal medicine, blowing, and empowered phrases.	Male	Sick individuals

The Household

It may be possible to argue that the smallest and most significant social unit in Laos is the household (Potter 1977; Tambiah 1970:14-15).[25] Taxes are calculated in the rural areas based on household income. When labor is needed for a community project, one person from each household must work. The population of each village is calculated and perceived in terms of the number of households. At least one person from each household contributes to the temple and participates in the temple rituals. It is not necessary in these situations for more than one person per household to participate.

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[25] The best review of the literature on this issue has been done by Potter (1977:1-22).

Households are typically multi-generational, with grandparents, the head of household's wife and children, and a married daughter and her husband all living under one roof. When another daughter marries, the first married couple moves out to build their own house in the family compound. It is common for everyone in the compound to work the same piece of land until the head of household feels too old to govern anymore and divides the land among his children.

A Lao household is the property of the female line (matrilineal). Traditionally, men leave their homes at marriage to live in their wife's family home for a time (uxorilocal residence). But descent is traced through men as much as through women (bilateral).[26] While the family property is under the control of the leading male in the house, it is not his to sell without the consent of the women, who actually own the property. The female ancestors are the dominant ones in the household, and if social taboos are broken, these ancestors may inflict family members with illness. The same may happen if the ancestors are neglected or forgotten (Potter 1977:2; R. B. Davis 1984).

A Lao woman or child does not normally make an important decision without consulting the head of the household. Normally, his decision is obeyed. At the same time, a father or husband does not normally make a decision that will cause his children or wife to loose heart (À¦ñ¨-¡¿--ìñ¤-Ã¥). Crucial to this social exchange is the ritual acknowledgement of the place of the father or husband in the household. To not acknowledge his place would cause him to lose face and then respond harshly. His position is normally deemed more important than the decision being made. Family

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[26] Tambiah suggests that in northeast Thailand the social structure is colored by matrilateral patterns but "kinship is bilateral and ego-oriented" (1970:15).

interdependence is maintained by ritually acknowledging the right of the older one while still providing each adult with the right to pursue his or her own fate.

Pierre Clement's description of the spatial implications of Lao houses (1982) is worth summarizing, since it demonstrates the spatial and directional perception of the Lao in regard to their home. According to Clement (see Figure 9 below), when Lao villages are built near a river (as is typical), the river serves as the axial line of orientation providing villagers with four directions: upstream (ÀÎõº), downstream (êªÉ), the far bank of the river (±¾¡), and the village side of the river (±¾¡-®É¾-).[27] The far bank of the river is inhabited by the families who first settled the village; those who arrive later build homes to the south, or downstream of the others. Homes are built with the ridge purlin parallel to the stream.

The internal orientation of the house is governed by access rules, levels of space, and direction based on the river. To enter a Lao house you must make right angle turns.

Sleeping Position of Head of Household

Position of a Corpse Laid in a Home
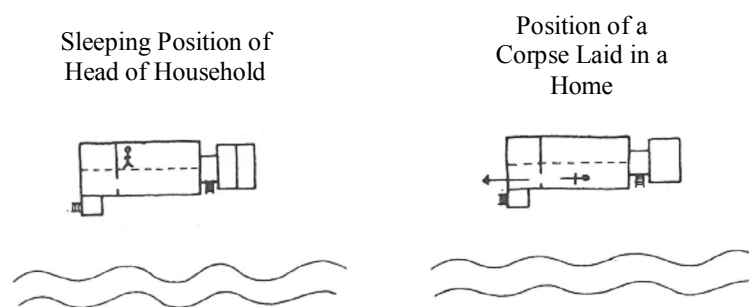
FIGURE 9

LAO HOUSES ARRANGED ALONG RIVER
(Adapted from Clement 1982:65)

Normally you enter by climbing up steps onto a verandah. To enter the home (only when invited) you turn to the right or left and enter the reception room. To go from there into a bedroom (which is only open to non-family members during ritual occasions) another right angle turn is required. These right angle turns across thresholds in the house mark the social space of the house. The purlin ridge divides the house into two parts. The Lao always sleep on the upper side away from the entrance (see Figure 10).

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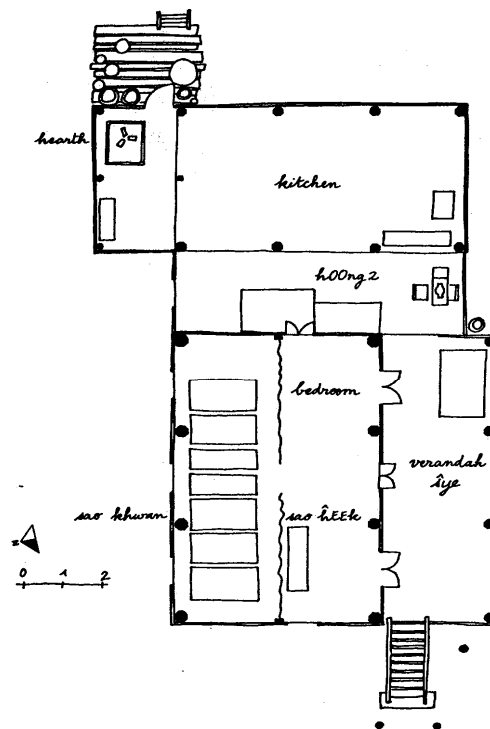
[27] Clement points out that most rivers in Laos flow north to south into the Mekong that is the major axial line of orientation for the country (1982:62). According to R. B. Davis, the words north and south also mean upstream and downstream. Two villages along the river near each other are called the northern village and the other the southern village whether or not they lie in those directions or not. The point is that one is upstream and the other downstream from the other (1984:47).

FIGURE 10

FLOOR PLAN OF VIENTIANE LAO HOUSE
(Clement-Charpentier 1982:51)

Members of the household sleep at a right angle to the ridge with their head pointing toward the upper (east) side of the house.[28] "In contrast, when someone dies in the house, [the body is placed] on the side of the house opposite to the sleeping side and parallel to the ridge purling, [the feet of the corpse] facing the front elevation of the gable" (see Figure 9 above, Clement 1982:64). The highest ranked place in the house is the bedroom, and it is often elevated to a level higher than the rest of the house. The bathing area is the lowest in status, and is built at the lowest level. The house is often built on twelve posts. The first post that is erected is the sacred center of the house (À¦ö¾-À°¡). Another post is said to be the dwelling place of the home's *khwan* spirit (À¦ö¾-¢¸ñ-).

The household typically places offerings (sticky rice balls, dried meat, and whiskey) in an auspicious spot for ancestral spirits (°ó-¯ø-¨È¾-ª³¾-¨¾¨) of the spouse who owns the home (normally the wife). The ancestral spirits of the opposite spouse are given a special residence outside of the household (Somchit 2001). Other spirits (spirits of ancestors but their names have often been forgotten) propitiated are the guardian spirit of the village (°ó-Íñ¡-®É¾-) and of the *müang* to which the *baan* belongs (°ó-Íñ¡-À´õ°¤) and certain territorial spirits (e.g., of the forest, river, a large tree, rice field, and so on). In addition to these spirits of the dead, collectively known as *phii* (°ó-------), there are gods

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[28] If a married daughter and her husband live in the house they sleep to the south of the head of the household and his wife. The head of the household sleeps to the north of his wife (R. B. Davis 1984:49).

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and goddesses.[29] Many of these deities are woven into the stories of the Buddha's life, and together they form one cosmological system. While some scholars describe Lao and Thai religion as a syncretism of Animism, Brahmanism, and Buddhism,[30] the Lao most likely experience religion as one total religious field (Tambiah 1970:337ff; R. B. Davis 1984).

Village Life

A Lao village, *baan* (®É¾-), forms the center of social life for most Lao. Even Vientiane,[31] the capital city, can be broken down into a series of villages. Villages are defined most frequently by the presence of a temple or *wat* (ˌñ©):

> The most conspicuous physical feature of the village is the cluster of buildings comprising the *wat*. The components are a large wooden sala (preaching hall), a small dilapidated *bood* (the chapel, where ordination takes place and where monks hold certain services, such as confessions, to which laymen are not admitted), and *khuti* (monks' dwellings). The *wat* compound is large and bounded by a fence with two gateways. The village school is held in the *sala*, and this fact alone makes the *wat* a focal point in village life and a source of ear splitting noise, caused by children both at work (largely repetitive learning) and at play. In addition to its serving as school and place of religious worship and instruction, the sala is also the village hall and large meetings of a secular nature are held there. The *wat* is thus the focus of village devotional and recreational activities, the two of which merge in certain collective rites distributed over the year (Tambiah 1970:11).

This same situation is found in the Lao PDR in lowland Lao villages.[32]

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[29] Among the most important are the giant water serpent *phanyanaak* (-¾¡), the earth goddess *Naang Thawranii* (-¾¤-êð-ì½--ó), the goddess of rice *Naang Khaosook* (-¾¤-À¢í¾-Â§¡), the spirit of the sky Lord
Thään (²½-¨¾-Á«-), and Hindu gods (the most important for the Lao being *Indra* (²½-°ò-).

[30] Writers who approach Thai and Lao religion in this fashion are Gustafson (1970), Terwiel (1994), and Zago (1972).

[31] Vientiane is the largest city by far in Laos, with a population of over 500,000. The next largest town would be Savannakhet, with only about 50,000 people.

Lao villages are organized around the headman (-¾¨-®É¾-) and the elders of the village (°øÉ-À«í¾-°øÉ-Á¡È). The elders are married men of varying ages, with children who live in the village. The headman makes decisions after discussion with other key village leaders and elders. Since village meetings always include a meal and whiskey, women are unofficially in attendance to prepare the food. But, since the "liberation" in 1975, women are also formally represented by the leaders of the Lao Women's Union (LWU).[33] The LPRP also appoints a person through the Front to represent its political concerns at village meetings. While this person is normally someone from the village, he or she nevertheless reports on the activities of the village, and must be treated carefully by the others.

Typically, the villagers are related biologically or by marriage. Two people who often do not have close relatives in the village are the head school teacher and the temple abbot. The presence of both teachers and monks from outside the village is acceptable based on the status afforded them as representatives of the national (*müang*) government.

Besides the *wat* compound, the village is also marked by non-visual boundaries. Villagers speak of the forest (¯È¾), the rice fields (-¾) that various households work, and a water source such as a river (¹É-¸¨-Õ), a lake (|v'), or a swamp ([b'). Homes are

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[32] It should be noted that today most villages have a separate school. It is also important to note that Lao groups that follow a more patrilineal social structure such as the *Tai Dam*, *Tai Dang* and *Tai Neua* have varying levels of interest in Buddhism and may not have a local temple. In those cases the center of the village may be more properly described as the guardian spirit pole, or *lak müang*.

[33] While there are also youth and men's organizations that operate under the Lao Front, they are not nearly as active as the LWU.

always built in clusters, and no one thinks of living separately by themselves. The number of households averages roughly fifty to seventy houses.[34]

There is a clear conceptual contrast between village and forest. The forest is an uncivilized and dangerous place where many spirits live. Those who live in the forest are feared since they are associated with the forest's danger and power. This is symbolized by the Lao belief that the meat of forest animals gives a person more strength than the meat of domesticated animals. While the Lao understand raw or undercooked meat as less domesticated, they also know that it gives a person more personal strength and power. It is unusual to attend a wedding where raw meat of some kind is not served.

The Müang

Frequently, when a Lao is speaking of his home he or she will use the phrase *baan kerd müang nawn* (®É¾--À¡ó©-À´õº¤-º-). This couplet translates to "the village of my birth, the principality *müang* (À´õº¤) that I sleep in." The couplet signals the close association between belonging to the village and belonging to a larger organizational power structure known as *müang*. Today the nation of Laos is often referred to as *Müang Lao*. Another look at the meaning behind the word *müang* is important to understanding the perception of nation-state and powers larger than the village.

In the Lao context, *müang* traditionally referred to a collection of *baan* that worked together to manage a rice field irrigation system they mutually depended on (see

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[34] Clement-Charpentier writes of Lao villages that are loosely grouped, with fenced yards with kitchen gardens (common in the Vientiane area), and compactly grouped villages, with no yard but with houses built parallel to each other "running down to the stream" (common in northern Laos 1982:49).

Surarerks 1998:37-48 and Kato 1998:49-70) or defended. *Müang* can also conceptually

refer to all the higher powers to which the village is obligated, such as alliances of rich

and powerful people. At its core *müang* refers to the ruling powers outside the village, in

whatever shape they take.

The customs and beliefs in the village are oriented toward household kin. The

social relations of the village are less hierarchical, and religion is more animistic. On the

müang side Lao culture tends toward law, hierarchy, overlapping power centers, and

Buddhist (and Brahman) ritual legitimization of power.[35] A. Thomas Kirsch writes the

following regarding the relationship between Buddhism and non-village power:

> Buddhism provides the Thai with a unitary set of values and a common
> ritual and expressive language, uniting them in a larger Buddhist moral
> community that transcends particularistic and local loyalities and
> attachments (1977:261).

David Wyatt provides a historical perspective on the concept of *müang*:

> *Müang* is a term that defied translations, for it denotes as much personal as
> spatial relationships. . . . It can mean both the town located at the hub of a
> network of interrelated villages and also the totality of town and villages
> which was ruled by a single *chao*, "lord." . . . *Tai* villages banded together
> for mutual defense under the leadership of the most powerful village or
> family, whose resources might enable it to arm and supply troops. In
> return for such protection villages rendered labor service to their *chao*, or
> paid him quantities of local produce or handicrafts (as quoted in Evans
> 1990:30-31).

The concept of *müang* power, rather than signifying territorial power, indicated

the right to loyalty and tribute paid by a local population. One of the ways in which local

populations survived oppressive *müang* rulers was to give their loyalty to more than one.

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[35] Karl Wittfogel (1957) has argued a theory that shows a "relationship between the construction, maintenance, and supervision of large-scale public works-particularly irrigation systems-on the one hand, and the emergence of strongly centralized, autocratic, and bureaucratic social structures-or what he calls oriental despotisms-on the other" (Kaplan and Manners 1972:97).

This allowed them to play one power off of the other and swap loyalties, as the situation demanded. The relationship between people and powerful spiritual beings in the cosmology of the Lao is understood in much the same way.

The New Nationalism

Historically the center of Lao identity was the symbolism of the monarchy. Like many Southeast Asian countries, state power in Laos was established through religious ritual (Evans 1998:168).[36] But the persistence of regionalism has worked heavily against the effort to build a sense of nationalism. As was stated above, there was no independent unification of Laos between the time that Lan Xang split into three principalities in 1695 and the coming to power of the communist government in 1975. Nevertheless, the French, in partnership with the Lao elite, worked hard during the 1940s to establish a modern sense of nationalism. Their chief tools for this effort were a revisionist reading of Lao history and their attempts "to standardize a 'Lao' language in order to facilitate the national project" (Ivarsson 1999:61).

C. J. Christie has raised the question of the future survival of the Lao PDR given its geo-political vulnerability (1982:73-74). As was shown above, its relatively small population and regional politics have left it vulnerable to centuries of invasions from its neighbors. Regional politics in this century led to internal divisions evident by the occurrence of fratricide in the monarchy and the thirty-year civil war that ended in 1975 (Evans 1998:188).[37] The difficulty in travel because of the mountains and ethnic diversity

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[36] These rituals are often historically grounded in ancient *Tai*, and some times Brahman rites, but sanctioned and empowered by the presence of Buddhist monks (Reynolds 1978).

[37] See Søren Ivarsson's article "Toward a New Laos" in Evans (1999) for a discussion of the

have also made it difficult to bring the kind of unity that translates into national strength. Even today the Lao language has not been standardized with an official dictionary.

In the old days, the legitimacy of the hierarchical structure of Lao society (including their domination of the *Kha*, the pre-*Tai* peoples of the area who are considered to be socially inferior) was ritually renewed on at least three occasions each year in the royal capital of Luang Prabang.[38] Buddhist monks, the King, Lao commoners, and the local *Kha* participated in affirming the structure of the cosmos (Reynolds 1978). This was true up until the "liberation" in 1975.

Initially the communists attempted to build a sense of nationalism around the concept of liberation from foreign control and socialism. But in a study of post-liberation Laos, Evans says that the destruction of the monarchy by the communists may have culturally enfeebled the country (1998:178). When the LPRP abandoned its drive toward socialism in the early 1990s, the issue of legitimacy of the new government became acute. In the Party's struggle to find a new basis for legitimacy, they are attempting to re-create old royal rituals without mentioning the monarchy. However, the tension between the need for the ritual legitimacy offered by Lao Buddhism and Brahman court ritual and the need to suppress the memory of the monarchy in light of communist ideology has not been overcome, leaving the new rituals and symbols impotent (1998:168-172).

French strategy to help create a sense of Lao nationalism to counter Thai nationalist trends.

[38] The rituals were performed by dancers wearing the masks of the primal Lao ancestors *Pu Yer* and *Ya Yer* (¯øÈ-Àµó-¨È¾-Àµó) and the King. The myth behind the ritual said that the ancestors of the Lao had once

been inhabitants of the celestial city *Müang Thaen*. When they came to the earth it was covered by water, but wherever they stepped, land appeared. They found three gourds. Out of the first came the royal clan, out of the second came the Lao commoners, and out of the third came the *Kha* (Reynolds 1978:166ff; Berval 1959:379ff).

ASEAN

Lao who live outside of the larger towns know little about ASEAN. For them this category might be better named, "other Asian nations." But for the Lao aware of their membership in ASEAN there is considerable interest.[39] This membership has afforded the Lao PDR a respectable place among Southeast Asian nations. But there has been tension too. The Lao PDR has struggled to meet the standard requirements of ASEAN economically and diplomatically. ASEAN's principle of mutual non-interference has allowed the Lao PDR to avoid being drawn into the political complexities of Burma, Indonesia, and Malaysia while at the same time avoiding criticism for its own dismal performance in the area of human rights (see Mitton 1999a; 1999b).[40]

Participation in ASEAN is regulated by the special relationship with Vietnam. While Vietnam is clearly the lead partner, the relationship serves both countries' international security goals. By having a loyal country on its west border, Vietnam can put concerns for Thailand aside and concentrate on its tenuous relations with China. Laos on the other hand gains security against encroachment from Thailand and China.[41]

Relationships with Foreigners

When the Lao refer to foreigners (£ö--ªÈ¾¤-¯-½-Àê©), they are normally speaking about western foreigners. When speaking about other Asians the Lao typically

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[39] The Lao PDR formally joined ASEAN on July 10, 1997 (ASEAN Secretariat 2002b).

[40] This is especially true in the area of religious liberty but also in terms of freedom of speech. See the US State Department Report (2001). Although ASEAN has to some degree tried to take up Thailand's policy of "flexible engagement," they have always backed away from this in favor of a policy of noninterference. Lao Foreign Minister Somsavat Lengsavad has of course argued in favor of this stating, "Since its establishment 33 years ago, noninterference has always been the main practice among ASEAN members, I don't see any reason to change that" (Crispin 2000).

[41] The 1987 border war between Laos and Thailand proved the value of this relationship to the Lao (*Bangkok Post* 1988).

name the country they are from. The category of "foreigner" is understood as a rich, powerful, physically large, somewhat smelly, quick tempered, free of obligation (this can be both seen positively and negatively), and kindhearted person. Few Lao want to be like foreigners, but the power they represent is difficult for the Lao to resist. When Vientiane Lao were recently asked which country would be a good model for the Lao PDR, nearly all the respondents chose Asian countries. America and France were only mentioned by 7 percent of the respondents (Institute for Cultural Research 1999:61).

Foreigners impact Laos in at least two significant ways. First, they are associated with the large international aid effort. Nothing symbolizes this more than the large United Nations (UN) presence. In one sense the UN serves as a constant reminder of the economic backwardness of the country. Evans considers backwardness "the dominant consciousness among ordinary Lao about their society today" (1998:190). In another sense, the LPRP has constantly looked to foreign experts to assist their drive toward technological and economic development. This goal has created a future-oriented desire to modernize even as the state promotes traditional values (1998:191).

Second, Western culture is seen as both attractive and destructive. As in Thailand the Lao seek to obtain Western technology and education without losing their traditional values. The tension is clear. Western technology and education have been built on values (e.g., creativity and freedom) that often run counter to Lao values. More will be said about the impact of the international community in the next section.

<u>Globalization and Traditionalism</u>

Although one of the research questions for this study asks about social change, the question is given less space than the others, simply because there have not yet been large changes to Lao society. In some aspects the social context of Laos seems to have hardly changed at all. Urbanization, often one of the main catalysts for social change, is just beginning to impact Vientiane.

Joel Halpern pointed out more than forty years ago that Lao peasants contributed very little to the national state. At that time the government budget came primarily from import duties, taxes on urban merchants, and foreign aid estimated to be as high as 80 percent of the budget (1960:74). As was pointed out above, a large percentage of the economy in Laos today continues to come from foreign aid. In fact, one of the most striking impressions from reading through Halpern's writings and other materials written in the 1960s is that not a great deal has changed.

In spite of the Lao resistance to change, clearly some change is happening as the dynamics of globalization seep into the Lao PDR. These changes are felt primarily in the Municipality of Vientiane and in other towns found along the borders with Thailand and China. While it is not my purpose to offer an exhaustive analysis of social change in Laos, I will at least identify six significant changes that have been in process since the end of World War II.

From Regionalism to Nationalism

First, there is a gradual shift happening from regional *müang* politics to state politics. This is being brought about by a profound shift in the concept of time and nation.

It "came to Laos in the nineteenth century when French colonialism introduced the idea of 'the history of the nation'" (Evans 1998:185). It was the French, of course, who demarcated the existing borders of the Lao PDR.[42] After World War II and the rise of the Lao *Issara* (Free Lao) movement, the French realized that they needed to speed up the development of state institutions and a sense of nationalism.[43] They initially attempted to do this by establishing a historical narrative of nationalist identity through the Lao *Nhay* (Great Laos) newspaper during the French Vichy era (Ivarsson 1999:61-68).[44] There were also efforts to distinguish the Lao language from Thai by standardizing Lao in distinct ways (Ivarsson 1999). This drive toward a sense of nationalism was taken forward and developed by the LPRP. MacAlister Brown and Joseph Zasoff write the following in this regard:

> The nationalism represented by the quiescent royal family in Luang Prabang after World War II was neither dynamic nor pervasive enough throughout the country to pre-empt the rival nationalism generated by the *Neo Lao Issara* in 1950 and the NLHS [*Neo Lao Hak Sat* was the political front for the LPRP] in 1956, which trumpeted the anticolonial cause. This appeal might be discounted by the evident dependence of the fronts on Vietnamese backing, but the NLHS leaders did their best to mask this relationship as well as the existence of the Lao People's Party. In the mountain provinces, the Pathet Lao [the communist forces] boldly introduced its own symbols of nationhood--a flag, an anthem, national days, and currency--to people whose previous psychological field was often restricted to their village or *tasseng* [sub-district administration] (1986:269-270).

Evans argues that the communists have spent a great deal of time since the late 1980s finding ways to legitimize their regime by reinterpreting traditional religious

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[42] It is important to point out, however, that the entire land area was only unified after World War II (Ivarsson 1999:76).

[43] See Geoffrey Gunn's book (1988:123) for a discussion of the role of the Japanese occupation in Laos and its role in the development of the Lao *Issara* movement.

[44] One strategy employed in this newspaper was to connect modern Laos with mythical images that Lao had of the greatness of the former *Lan Xang* Kingdom (Ivarsson 1999:68).

rituals and reincorporating some of them into civic ceremonies (1998). The communist narrative selectively forgets some of their more recent extremes and associates itself with the long (and often fictional) past. Evans wonders though if there might be a counter-memory of Lao history in and outside of Laos that the LPRP may have to answer to eventually. But with the current open economic policy providing the possibility of upward social mobility, many Lao seem willing to forget the bad and move on with the good. Evans quotes one Lao as saying, "we are all Lao who all share the same traditions as we always have done" (1998:190). This is a telling statement since it reveals that the one common denominator in this person's mind is the cultural traditions *heedkhong paphanii* (»ó©-£º¤-¯½-À²--ó) of the lowland Lao. To a Lao this phrase conjures up images of the Lao religious ritual system.

Evans suggests that there may be a second common experience that all Lao are willing to recognize. That is the experience of "backwardness." The overwhelming presence of the foreign aid community and on-going development projects form a depressing backdrop to the images of "the good life" constantly beamed in from Thai television studios in Bangkok.

Between the appeal to tradition and the identity of backwardness, a sense of nationalism is slowly taking shape. But it is a nationalism that Evans describes as disoriented. The Lao agree that they must move out of backwardness and onto the world stage, but how and in what direction, no one yet has been able to answer with authority.

From Personal Power to Civil Law

Globalization and the project of nation building with foreign assistance are also forcing the Lao to confront the challenge of universal human rights and international law. These are values that were born in the central, Western worldview idea of the absolute, (whether this was seen as God or some other organizing principle such as democracy). As Niels Mulder (1979) will be shown to argue below, the Lao and the Thai have a non-centered worldview that functions by mediating moral goodness and amoral power. To the Lao, power is a core issue in the universe that exists in tension with their social values. This can be seen clearly in that, while the government has written into the constitution a guarantee of religious freedom, dozens of Christian churches were closed between the years 1999 and 2000 (USSD 2001).[45]

In a similar way, "a massive legislative effort has taken place in Laos since 1986, the aim of which is to create a legal environment that will attract private investors, both Laotian and foreign" (Radetzki 1994:801). Ironically, lawyers are only allowed to advise their clients and are forbidden to defend their clients by arguing on the basis of the law. There are also numerous stories of the government failing to live up to foreign investment agreements (Lintner 1998b).

At one level Laos is going through the motions of putting civil law in place. These laws guide civil decisions until they are in conflict with the will of powerful people in the government or the LPRP. There is little evidence of a willingness to exchange due process of law for negotiated settlements that rely on relationships of power. Reports of

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[45] Article 30 of the Constitution reads, "Lao citizens have the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in religions" (Faming 1998:28).

people being held without trial are fairly regular (USLOC 1994b). Very often the process of the law itself becomes another tool in the hands of those with power.[46] Most civil disputes continue to be settled through arbitration at a local level. At its best this kind of arbitration reflects the wisdom and moral power of villagers. There is evidence, however, that this sort of morality is increasingly being put aside for the expediency of power that serves personal interests. This point becomes clearer in the review of Mulder's thesis below.

From Scarcity to Capitalism

A Lao friend with whom I worked related to me her story of surviving the poverty that gripped Laos during the socialist years (1975-1986). She was forced by the circumstances, she said, to become a petty merchant. This of course required her to travel a lot and leave her children in her husband's care. In relating this story she stopped and confided that the Lao have traditionally looked down on merchants such as the Vietnamese and Chinese. The roles that Lao traditionally aspired to were that of farmer, soldier, teacher, government employee, and monk, but today lowland Lao are moving quickly into merchant roles and learning to play the capitalist game.[47]

Those with real and sustained wealth (normally among those who live in urban areas) play powerful roles in the national urban hierarchy that is associated with the word

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[46] An example of this is the use of the legal system against the Australian employees of a gem mining company, who were accused by the government of embezzling profits from the company. The government is a shareholder in the company (see newspaper articles by Hedge 2001 and Taylor 2001).

[47] The Vietnamese, Chinese, and Indians have traditionally been the merchants in Laos. The Lao words for business person carry an anti-social sentiment that convey someone who profits from another person *maekha* (Á´È-£É¾), *phawkha* (²Ò-£É¾).

müang. They demonstrate their position by displaying their wealth with the purchase of cars and houses and large gifts to the local temple. People of extraordinary wealth and power are said to have more merit and virtue due to their gifts to the temple and the poor (cf. Halpern 1960:47). But people who feel vulnerable in the hierarchy are careful not to display wealth in ways that could suggest they have more of the available resources than people over them in the hierarchy do.

Today capitalism is promoted by the Lao government, and the lowland Lao are at an economic advantage due to their place in the hierarchy of the nation. This advantage takes the shape of connections in government offices controlling taxes and business permits. The principle of reciprocity remains active, and Lao business people are expected to make donations to the temple and to informally compensate government officials who have assisted their business efforts. This is in keeping with the cosmology of hierarchical societies that tend to restrict the accomplishments of people in ways that do not let them overtake those of higher rank (M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990:45). Even so, the power of the international economy is making it possible for some people to gain an upper hand through hard work and skill, in spite of their disadvantageous social standing (e.g., Vietnamese and Hmong merchants in Vientiane).

For the most part, the market economy is understood within the cosmology of hierarchy. Those who are skilled in dealing with it succeed in managing the perverse, yet tolerant power of free enterprise. The power of the market is of the same kind as that of the government and the spirit world. All three are amoral powers that can be managed by experts. Business experts now work hand-in-hand with religious ritual experts (e.g. the local monk and *mawphawn*) to see that business ventures are successful. There is no

question, however, that as capitalism gained speed in Laos after 1990, the Lao experience with wealth creation began to bring change to the traditional view of nature. Urban Lao, while not abandoning the traditional rituals to ensure prosperity, also know that good businesses need a context of political stability, a stable currency, and low inflation.

For most Lao, the capitalist experiment in Laos has not brought significant change yet. In some areas significant numbers of people continue to experience poverty. The experience of some poor, rural Lao is that the availability of nature's resources is unpredictable. Poor villages sometimes follow a fatalistic cosmology that views nature as capricious. In these areas, personal magic and luck play a significant role in the worldview.[48] For the most part, however, Lao society tends to see nature as perverse but tolerant if handled well by experts (M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990:27-28). In villages where resources are generally scarce, no one knows with any certainty whether or not there will be enough rice. Drought, floods, or war could destroy everything they have. On the other hand, there may be a harvest with a surplus to sell or an international aid agency may drop in to install a needed irrigation system. Villagers do their best with the help of ritual experts to manage the spiritual powers that control nature. These spirits are fickle and sensitive about their honor.

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[48] This is not true of rural villages were food supplies are adequate and that are integrated into the national administration. In these villages and in the large towns the cosmology is more hierarchical.

From Mothers to Merchants

Traditionally Lao women, like most women in Southeast Asia, have played an important role in controlling family wealth.[49] Since Lao culture is matrilineal, this is not surprising. While petty merchants were generally looked down on, women were expected to supplement family incomes through garden produce, and silk and hand-woven textiles that they sold in local markets or to traveling merchants. After reviewing the literature on the prevalence of matrilineal and matrilocal patterns in Southeast Asia, and especially in nothern Thailand, Ann Hale concludes, "There is every reason for suggesting that throughout peasant Southeast Asia, women dominate in the area of descent, residence and inheritance" (1984:333).[50] The matrifocal character of Thai and Lao society is the subject of proverbs and reverenced spiritually through spirit cults (Potter 1977).[51]

> The consequence of matrilocal residence patterns and female preferential inheritance of land is a localized group of matrilineally related households. These households are related through mother's female kin, and some configuration of these households would say of themselves that they are of the same spirit. The spirit is inherited in the female line by both sex siblings (Hale 1984:337).

The influence of women in Laos, however, must be understood in terms of their role as mothers. Motherhood, furthermore, is geographically tied to the household (Walker 1999:81). Travel for women, and especially unmarried women, continues to be

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[49] Hale cites Kirsch's (1975) research that showed that "three times more women than men were occupied as large business owners and managers, small business owners and managers, market sellers and market gardeners" than men (Hale 1984:331). The same conditions exist in Laos. In implementing income generation programs for eleven years I learned to focus credit on women and their skill development in handicrafts and silk production.

[50] Hale is making a statement about the dominant cultural groups in Southeast Asia. This is not true of many of the minority groups in the region such as the Hmong.

[51] There is a Lao proverb that says a husband is successful because of his wife (Á¹¸--©ó-¨Éº--¹ö¸-°ö¸-©ó-¨Éº--À´ñ¨). The interesting part of this proverb is that it parallels the wife with the head.

seen as immoral behavior in rural areas of Laos.[52] Villages, as Hale has told us, are a group of households that are often related through the extended matrilineal kin group. We can extend their influence even further when we recognize that the center of every Lao village is the Buddhist temple and that these temples serve as places for merit making. As was argued above, this merit making is often focused on women and their ancestors.

Today the impact of globalization on Laos is extending the influence of women outside of the household. The availability of education and the communist policy of promoting the place of women in society have been contributors to this change. There has clearly been an increase in the number of women in the political area of Laos. But perhaps even more influential has been the combination of economic necessity and opportunity.

Andrew Walker has traced the expansion of the role of women beyond the household into the long-distance trading business. The economic hardships of the socialist era in Laos forced married couples working in the government to decide that one of them should resign and work in the local markets. While both husband and wife were often educated and trained, it was normally the woman who left for work in the markets, since economics has been a mother's traditional area of governance.

The war itself forced an unprecedented level of mobility upon the Lao. Women were often away from their kinship groups for the first time, and forced to build new alliances or reactivate old ones that had also been displaced. Through the economic necessity created by poverty after the revolution, women began making the trip across the

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[52] "The views of Kirsch (1982, 1985) and Keyes (1984) resonate with reports of taboos and anxieties surrounding women's mobility in both Thailand and Laos" (Walker 1999:81).

river to Thailand to access goods for trade. Walker argues that the refugee crisis gave many Lao women unprecedented experience in mobility (1999:89). The refugees themselves frequently used their contacts in Thailand to involve themselves in the cross border trade between Laos and Thailand. A similar situation occurred on the border with China. Walker comments on the consequences as follows:

> Maneuver seems to be a more apt description of the social and cultural strategies of these mobile women than either the 'unmoor[ing] from . . . Buddhist values' (Keyes 1984:236) that some seem to regret, or the 'play[ing] havoc with gender ideologies which resonate with--rather than abandon or subvert--some of the common cultural forms and practices in their communities. They have succeeded in a careful intertwining of motherhood, money, travel and sex . . . allowing enterprising Lao women new opportunities for profit and pleasure (1999:97).

From Ritual Experts to Foreign Experts

Like many hierarchical societies, Lao people have relied on ritual experts to guide them through the problems that life in Laos presents. When a problem is confronted the Lao rarely attempt to solve it themselves. Instead, they look for expert advice. This might come from their grandmother in the household, or the local monk. But it might just as well come from the local ritual expert in *khwan* rituals or the local shaman. Experts play a vital role in the cosmology of the Lao.

Since the end of World War II, foreign experts have been a cornerstone in Lao plans for national development (see Halpern 1960:53). Western technology has won the confidence of many Lao people as a source of power that is more effective than many of the traditional ones. This does not mean that the Lao are completely abandoning the traditional experts. It means that they have more experts available to them than ever before. In characteristic fashion, the Lao keep each expert carefully relegated to their designated ritual areas. At the national level the role of the foreign expert *siosaan* has

become a mainstay in society. It should be noted, however, that there is at the same time a push to train Lao experts in technology. For now, at least, the foreign expert is still held to be a vital part of the effort to increase the level of national prosperity.

Lao Ritual Systems

Lao religion, politics, and social structure are not easily pulled apart for analysis. They work together as a unified whole, shaping and reinforcing each other. This is done most powerfully through religious ritual. In this section I consider four approaches to understanding the Lao religious ritual system.[53]

Monks and Magic: Terwiel

Terwiel studied "the religious practices and beliefs of rural people which are closely related to the Buddhism of the canon . . . to demonstrate the fundamental difference between the intellectual, elitist conception of Buddhism and the rural, magico-animistic interpretation of Buddhism" (1994:241). His study done in a rural village of central Thailand makes four observations about the villagers' orientation toward magic.

First, "magical power appears to be centered in certain objects and connected with specific activities." This power is not distinct from the power of nature that is mythically personified in the goddess *Naang Thawranii* and in its male orientation as the water

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[53] Three of the studies that I review here represent fieldwork in Thailand. I have chosen them because I feel they are the most thorough studies done and because they are closely related to the Lao situation. For instance, there is probably as much or more difference between Vientiane Lao and Xieng Khuang Lao than there is between the northeast Thai that Tambiah studied and the Vientiane Lao. The northern Thai who are the subject of R. B. Davis' study also have a long history of interaction with the Lao and were often called Lao in the past. The study farthest from the Lao situation is Terwiel's study, but even here his study is of rural central Thailand and it reveals numerous similarities to the Lao context.

serpent *Phaynyanaak*.[54] There are many seats to magic power such as a particular tree, a termite hill, the monastery, and so on (Terwiel 1994:243-244).

Second, rural people believe that "the intensity of this power diminishes drastically when the physical distance from the source increases" (Terwiel 1994:243). Amulets have no power until they have had magic words *khathaa* (£¾-«¾) spoken over them by a powerful person such as a monk. "This is why bundles of objects are placed near a preaching monk" (1994:245). Most typically in Vientiane, power is transferred from the chanting monks to a silver bowl of water that is then poured out onto the earth for the ancestors. It may also explain why so many Lao refugees have been willing to convert to Christianity once they have arrived in the United States. Being far from the power sources of their ancestors may have given them a sense of freedom to change allegiances that they did not have in Laos.

Third, magical power is "made up of various types of power, the quality of which differs" (Terwiel 1994:243). There are various protective powers in the words ritual specialists chant that can be drawn on by villagers. But there are also ambiguous powers in nature that may help or hurt humans. Examples are the gods, ancestral spirits, guardian spirits of the village, and nature spirits. Beyond this there are evil spirits that are completely "dangerous and wholly aggressive" (1994:245).

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[54] The story of the water serpent has several versions but he is generally associated with the village water source (often the Mekong or a tributary). The *Naak* became a novice monk who wanted to follow the Buddha, but was rejected. He has since served as protector and ally to the Buddha and humans. He is the one who brings the rain, and is in primary focus during the Rocket Festival at the start of the rainy season. During this festival rockets are shot into the sky to bring the rains to the earth, symbolically impregnating the earth (see Tambiah's discussion 1970:169ff).

Fourth, "there appears to be a variation in the operative level of this power: sometimes the animistic aspect is hidden, in other cases it is central and direct" (Terwiel 1994:243). The primary example of a hidden animistic view of power is the monks' extreme avoidance of touching women. An example of a case where the animistic aspect of power is in full view is when water, or an amulet, is consecrated through magic words (1994:246).

While Terwiel's analysis can hardly be said to be wrong, it does seem to be incomplete. What it fails to address is the ways in which both monks and women (as mothers) serve as primary sources of moral power. This moral power, as Mulder argues, works in opposition to and in support of the magical level of power described by Terwiel. Terwiel suggests that the moral level of power in Thai Buddhism is only seen among the educated, wealthy, and urban Thai (1994:248). I will refrain from evaluating this observation for Thailand and simply say that this does not appear to be true in the Lao PDR. My experience there tells me that while the Lao elite often say that there is a distinction between their own beliefs and the beliefs of rural people, in fact their behavior often contradicts this assertion.[55]

Lao Cosmology: Davis

Richard B. Davis studied the cosmology of nothern Thai (known locally as *Khon Müang*) in terms of their calenderical rituals in order to "discover the structures

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[55] For example, one Lao gentleman that I worked with closely for a decade, who studied in France for seven years and served in the government for a number of years, was startled when I sat too close to a clothesline full of women's clothing drying in the sun. He quickly grabbed my arm and moved us to another location.

underlying" them and "to relate these structures to a common rationale" (1984:13). He considers the *müang* people's cosmology in terms of the cognitive universal categories of space, time, and "the distribution of human power" (1984:72). But it is the division of space in terms of high and low directional orientations that R. B. Davis sees as the key to understanding their cosmology. Using Douglas' theory, he argues that this cosmology is low group and high grid.[56]

R. B. Davis shows that the *müang*'s low group and high grid cosmology fits the nothern Thai view of the world as being a place "governed by luck, the influence of heavenly bodies, and other impersonal forces" (1984:72). The future is unpredictable in such a cosmology, and luck and private magic play significant roles. This seems to fit the situation in nothern Thailand except for two unique elements. First, Buddhism provides the cosmology of the *Müang* with an ultimate theory of causality. Second, "the *Müang* cosmos is populated by a vast array of personalized anthropoid powers which can be propitiated directly in order to alter one's circumstances" (1984:73). The *Müang* cosmos, as seen by R. B. Davis, is a hodgepodge of theories that often contradict one another. Nevertheless, they function and persist because they relieve people of individual responsibility for their own welfare (1984:73).

Northern Thai ritual is structured in terms of high and low to reflect the hierarchy in society and in the cosmos. But these structural categories of space, so carefully guarded in ritual, are "obliterated and fused" by their myths (R. B. Davis 1984:298). This

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[56] For R. B. Davis this finally explains the long debate over the virtues of John F. Embree's thesis (1950) that Thai society is a loosely structured social system. Embree's thesis is the subject of a whole book (Evers 1969).

is illustrated in the case of the rice goddess, Lady *Kaosook* (*Phii Tahääk* in Lao). R. B. Davis explains:

> Lady *Kaosook*, the rice goddess, is not quite human yet not quite otherwise. Her position with respect to culture vs. nature, clearly assigned to the human sphere in the rite of first-planting, is ambiguous in the myth. She oscillates between forest and settlement, moving from the crone's granary to the jungle stream and then back to the people and their villages (1984:292).

The conclusions that R. B. Davis comes to regarding the worldview of nothern Thai people are basically in agreement with those of Terwiel on the rural central Thai. Both see a magical orientation to the world as crucial. R. B. Davis takes the analysis a step further by showing that this orientation is in keeping with an authoritarian cosmology in which people give up responsibility for their fate because they feel powerless to make significant changes in the direction of their lives. Certainly, the economic and political plight of some rural people in Thailand and Laos has created a vulnerable situation for living that lends itself to fatalistic cosmology.

But the fatalism of some particularly oppressed areas does not fully account for the cosmology of most Thai and Lao. A desire to flee responsibility does not account for the significant efforts that the Thai and Lao make toward controlling their destiny through ritual. Neither does it account for the prevalence of hierarchy in the social structure. Magic would be better understood as one of several means for ritually establishing and managing relationships as a means of negotiating life circumstances. But this can only be done if we attribute to Lao society a hierarchical cosmology. Both R. B. Davis and Terwiel focus their attention on the animistic magic found in rural society. R. B. Davis does not attempt to relate this to the larger social system, and this fails to

address the larger hierarchy in which the nothern Thai live. The hierarchy beyond the village takes the shape of *müang* political and economic powers.

Four Ritual Systems: Tambiah

Stanley J. Tambiah approaches the religion of the northeast Thai through the study of ritual, and a structural analysis of the symbolism in their religious system in terms of opposition, complementarity, linkage, and hierarchy (1970:2). He takes a synchronic view of the ritual system in terms of four ritual categories: Buddhist rituals, guardian spirit rituals, *khwan* rituals, and malevolent spirit rituals. He argues that the northeast Thai experience this religious ritual system as a "single total field." Although he considers the historical process through which the religious system evolved from different religious traditions, the present experience is completed syncretistically so that it has become a religious system all its own. He pursues this theme by considering continuities in the religious system compared with the past, and transformations that have changed the religious system in ways that have resulted in its current condition (1970:4).

Through this analysis he extends ritual theory in two ways. First, Tambiah argues that both word and deed are important for the analysis of ritual. Ritual action alone does not tell the whole story. Second, he sees myth and ritual in a dialectical relationship that makes them interdependent. But Tambiah is also interested in the relationship between ritual and social action, and between ritual action and religious belief (1970:2-3). All this leads him to conclude that the religious system has worked over time to accommodate Buddhism and animism to one another (1970:377).

Figure 11 depicts Tambiah's model of the religious ritual system. Section 1 relates to the goal of a good death and a good rebirth that is the main (not only) role of Buddhist ritual. Section 2 speaks to the rituals that deal with the evil spirits that cause untimely deaths, often as a result of bad *karma*. Section 3 relates to the goal of prosperity and auspicious progress through the stages and transformations of life. This is the main concern of *khwan* rituals. Section 4 deals with protection and fertility that are the concern of the total community in guardian spirit rituals (Tambiah 1970:339).

Tambiah comments on these various ritual areas as follows:

[They] represent different ethical ideas and different approaches to the supernatural; their ritual functionaries are separate and cannot intermingle roles; the grammar of their rites is not the same. As structured ritual complexes they are separated, segregated, and yet complementary. It is in this sense that they are separate collective representations within a single field (1970:340).

Suukhwan Rituals

Buddhist Rituals

Household

Household

Rites of
Passage

House
Blessing

Mawphawn

Monk

Merit
Making
Festivals

Threshold
Rituals

Thevada

Buddha

Total
Community

Thiam
Medium

E   **D**   **C**   **B**   **3** **1**   **A**
Bun   Merit
Khwan   Vinnyaan
(life)   (death)
Baab   Demerit
4   **2**

Mortuary
Rituals

Guardian
Spirits

Malevolent
Spirits

Village
and
Nation

Cham
Intermediary

Maw Yao
Exorcist

Exorcism

Agricultural
Rituals

Household

← Rituals for affliction →

Total
Community

Total
Community

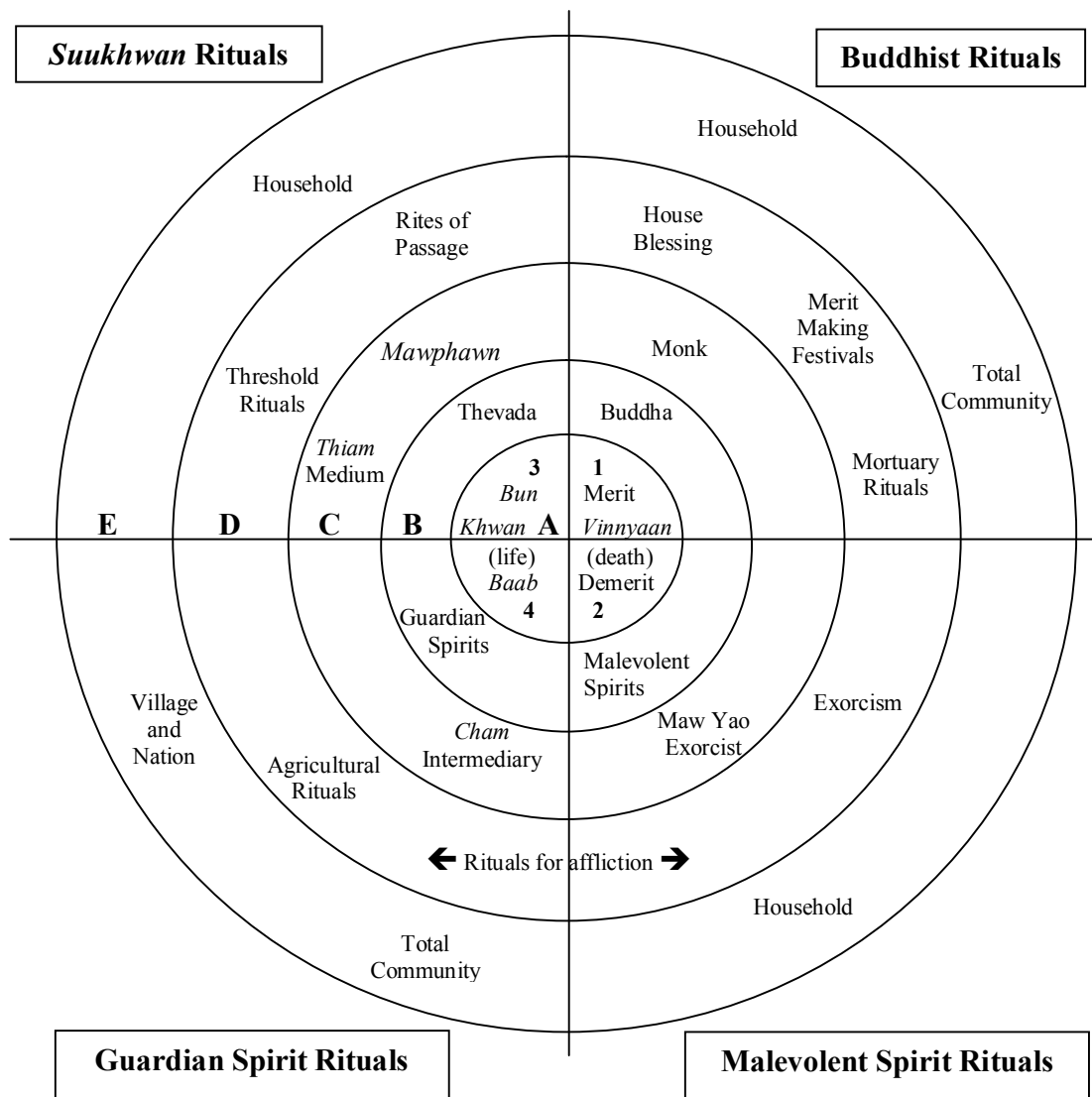**Guardian Spirit Rituals**

Malevolent Spirit Rituals

FIGURE 11

THE LAO RELIGIOUS FIELD
(Adapted from Tambiah 1970:338)

A. Primary religious concepts and fields of socio-religious interest
B. Supernatural personifications relating to A
C. Ritual specialists associated with B
D. Rituals conducted by C
E. Scale of social participation in D

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A key underlying distinction that he draws from the structure of these rituals is the opposing categories giving gifts to spirits/gods *khüangbusaa* (À£ˆ°¤-®ø-§¾) and making offerings to spirits *liangphii* (ìÉ¼¤°u). Gifts are given to the Buddha, divine beings from the Hindu pantheon (e.g., the earth goddess) and *khwan*. Offerings are made to malevolent and capricious spirits that are referred to collectively as *phii*. But the gifts given to the Buddha and monks can be vegetarian or can also include meat. Gifts given to the Brahman divine beings and *khwan* are normally vegetarian. The *phii*, on the other hand, are always given offerings that include meat.[57] From this data Tambiah says that, "the analyst tries to understand the logic of their differentiation in terms of underlying distinctions and relations" (1970:340).

> It is the fundamental difference in the idiom of gift giving and making offerings that assigns Buddhist norms and action a higher place than those associated with spirit cults, in the hierarchy of values and acts that comprises the universe of religious action. The Buddhist idiom of selfless giving of gifts, control of passion through asceticism, and renunciation of worldly interests is an idealization and extension of the social norm of reciprocity. On the other hand, the coercive relationship of bargaining with spirits, their placation or subduing, is again a statement of power relations which are an extension of socially manipulative behavior. Ethically the first ranks above the second, as purity above power; hierarchically the cults are similarly ordered (1970:342).

Tambiah sees a hierarchical relationship between the ritual systems (this is not shown in his model that he designed to show function). Marcel Zago comes to a similar conclusion regarding the hierarchy of ritual among the Lao.[58] Both see Buddhism playing the primary role in the Lao religious ritual system.

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[57] Tambiah notes that this is not true of the guardian spirit of the temple who is given a vegetarian offering (1970:342).

[58] Zago also sees hierarchy in Lao ritual but begins to link the higher status of Buddhism with the King and the cult of the guardian spirits to the aristocratic government leaders in the country (1972:361ff).

Tambiah also comes to a deep structural understanding regarding the opposition between purity as the morality of reciprocity, and power in Lao culture, but he does not take the step of linking this worldview opposition to social relations. Even more importantly, Tambiah's argument that the religion of the Lao in northeast Thailand is experienced as a unified whole needs to be considered in light of the emic categories of the Lao themselves. The Lao consistently make a distinction between Buddhist religious practices and beliefs *saatsana* (¦¾©-¦½-Î¾) and traditions related to animistic rituals *hitkhong paphani* (»ó©-£°¤-¯½-À²--ó). To the extent that Tambiah is arguing that the Lao do not feel a contradiction between these different ritual systems, he is correct, but it is difficult to argue that the Lao do not see the historical and religious distinctions.

Morality and Power: Mulder

Mulder (1979) picks up where Tambiah's analysis on the opposition between gifts to Buddhist and Brahman gods and spirit offerings leaves off. It also balances Terwiel's and R. B. Davis' animistic, amoral description of the Thai worldview, by picking up on the moral themes that Tambiah began to explore. In exploring the themes of power and morality, Mulder is struggling to understand how the Thai and the Lao can "have separate socio-religious structures [that is, Theravada Buddhism, worship of the gods, and allegiances to the divine king], identifying and dramatizing separate values, without splitting and differentiating the members of society in their allegiance to either system" (1979:124; brackets by Mulder, quoting Hans-Dieter Evers).

In Table 15 below, Mulder charts a distinction he sees in the Thai worldview between *khuna* power (defined as "moral goodness") and *decha*[59] power (defined as "amoral and immoral power"). Each of these kinds of power is then divided further in terms of whether it is domesticated or not.[60] *Khuna* power is divided into moral power that is beyond domestication (Column A), and moral power that is domesticated (Column B). *Decha*, or *Lit*, is divided into domesticated *saksit* power and the immoral power of evil spirits that cannot be domesticated. A fifth category shows the social area where *khuna* and *lit* are mediated.

Saksit powers (Column D in Table 15) are guardian spirits, ancestral spirits, Buddha images, amulets, and magic words. These powers are extremely sensitive about their rank and prestige and are easily offended, yet easily satisfied with a gift or show of respect. *Saksit* powers are not present for any particular reason except that they are powerful. "These powers represent the tenuous order outside the home or community; they are jealous of other powers, and never fully reliable" (Mulder 1979:116). They are amoral powers that respond based on how they are treated rather than on the moral performance of the humans. They can assist or hurt a household's quest for well-being. To ensure their assistance and avoid their retribution, individuals enter into contracts with these powers, agreeing to provide offerings and using the right ritual in return for blessings. Doing this domesticates these powers in positive ways for the community. Insulting s*aksit* power is not sinful but it is foolish.

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[59] I will use the Lao word *lit* (ìò©) in place of this word to reflect a more common Lao usage.
[60] The domesticated area of religious life is the area where humans in the secular world live.

TABLE 15 APPEARS AT THE END OF THIS FILE ALONG WITH OTHER HORIZONTAL TABLES

Undomesticated *lit* (Column E) is immoral power, and is aggressively hostile to humans in the form of evil spirits. They are unpredictable carriers of bad luck, and can only be dealt with "through strong magic, such as the powerful magic phrases *khaatha* of the Buddhist monk or the spirit doctor" (Mulder 1979:117). They are especially dangerous when a traveler is taken far away from the protective power of his or her village's guardian spirit. Death as the ultimate symbol of chaos is the extreme expression of this immoral power, and is best dealt with by the power of the Buddhist monks.

> In the Thai worldview man is thought to be surrounded by various powers. These powers relate to each other in a rather chaotic fashion, having neither a centre, a hierarchy, a point of legitimation, nor a purposeful perspective or a reference to moral law . . . his magical means . . . are essentially located in the manipulation of ritual form and serve his intentions to enjoy success and safety (1979:119).

Moral goodness *khuna* in the Thai worldview is not opposed to power, but is complementary to it.[61] It is in fact the use or sacrifice of power on behalf of another. Both are seen as necessary aspects to human existence. "Whereas power is powerful, moral goodness is powerless, its symbols being homely and female, and squarely located in this world" (Mulder 1979:119). The primary symbol of this moral goodness is the pure *bunkhun* or selfless giving of a mother. "At mother's side one is safe *pawt phay* (¯-º©-Ä²) and knows that one will be forgiven *aphay* (º½-Ä²). This goodness creates a moral debt that should be acknowledged; it is the source from which moral obligation arises" (1979:119).

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[61] Mulder points out that the Thai and Lao phrase that captures this category linguistically in the clearest way is *khun ngaam khwaamdii* (£÷--¤¾´-£¸¾´-©ó).

The spiritual beings associated with domesticated moral goodness are the rice goddess *Phii Tahääk* and the earth goddess *Naang Thawranii*. A secondary symbol of this kind of morality is the Buddhist monk or male teacher. Monks are powerless in that they are homeless and restricted from the use of violence and *lit*. They give out of their wisdom and understanding without concern for repayment. The moral goodness of the Buddha resides beyond human experience but is revealed in the *Dhamma* (Buddhist teaching). It is a kind of "morality and wisdom that is indifferent to whatever is *saksit*. Its message is focused beyond the human order, not domesticated, as it were, and its way needs to be cultivated in the individual" (Mulder 1979:121). This path is one that is beyond the vast majority of people; only monks and mothers past the childbearing years will seriously pursue it. For the most part, participation in Buddhist rituals by villagers is a means of ensuring "safety and auspiciousness." Mulder agrees with R. B. Davis when he concludes by saying that the Thai pursue the morality of mothers to a much larger extent than they do that of the Buddha, because doing so unburdens the individual. In the end, Mulder sees the Thai practicing Buddhism in an animistic and fatalist way (1979:121).

Mulder further states that the realms of *lit* and *khuna* are mediated by fathers who are expected to be good moral people, and able to access power when they need to. Rituals that deal with the ancestors, *khwan*, and civic occasions, work to mediate *lit* and *khuna*. Mulder sees this area as functioning to defend the stability of the social group (1979:123). "The center of this civic religion, though, is in the here-and-now, a combination of power and goodness that is not expressed in a cosmic or supernatural principle" (1979:122).

Mulder takes the structural analysis of power and morality in Thai society to a new level. His insight into the large role that mothers play in establishing a sense of moral obligation is key to connecting the religious ritual symbolism of the Thai to their social structure. He does not, however, take this step. He also observes that the opposition between morality and power in these societies may speak to an even deeper configuration of safety versus danger. This insight could assist in tying their religious systems to the social environment in which they live.

Mulder's argument seems to imply that mothers do not access amoral and immoral *lit* powers, when in fact they do so at least as often as men. His analysis would be improved if he had combined Columns B and C of Table 15 so that both fathers and mothers could be seen as joint mediators between moral goodness and amoral power. This would demonstrate that human morality is rarely operative without a connection to the realm of power (except in the case of the Buddha and a few highly respected monks). I believe Mulder intends to suggest this by pointing out the animistic use of Buddhism among the Thai. In similar fashion, he forgets that the ancestors (whom he relegates to the area outside the household) of the spouse, whose parents owned the house previously, do reside within the household. I will take up these points again when the data on *khwan* rituals is analyzed.

Literature on *Khwan* Rituals

The literature on *khwan* rituals reviewed below is presented in two parts. The first deals with interpretations of *khwan* rituals in Thailand, the second with *khwan* rituals specifically in Laos. There are two reasons for including the literature on Thai *khwan*

rituals. First, as was noted above, the Thai are closely related to the Lao culturally and socially, and second, there are very few serious studies on *khwan* rituals available.

Literature on Thai *Khwan* Rituals

Phya Anuman Rajadhon produced three ethnographic accounts of *khwan* rituals (1952, 1955, and 1962), the last one being the most complete account. His descriptions are predominately of very traditional, central Thai, *khwan* rituals,[62] although he does provide information gathered from interviews on northern and northeast Thai *khwan* rituals as well. He notices a limited use of *khwan* rituals in central Thailand as compared with northern and northeast Thailand.[63] He prefers to describe, with little attempt to interpret. While his interpretations must be read with a view for what he implies, rather than stating directly, about *khwan* rituals, it appears that he sees *khwan* rituals as rites of passage and healing rituals. He deals with the animist, Brahmin, and Buddhist influences by acknowledging all three, and suggests that they operate peacefully side by side in *khwan* ritual performance.

In describing the ritual belief and practice that revolve around the Thai rice goddess *Mää Posoop*, he again provides little interpretation. The data, however, clearly links the moral quality of the rice goddess to *khwan* rituals. Rajadhon shows how the Thai perform rituals for the *khwan* of the rice goddess that are believed to be crucial to the quality of the harvest. Central in these rituals is the desire to keep from offending the

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[62] He provides a long description of royal *khwan* rituals in his 1962 article that are only touched on by other researchers. These rituals are no longer practiced in the Lao PDR since the communist Party gradually did away with the monarchy after coming to power in 1975.

[63] This can also be seen in Terwiel's study of the Thai ritual system in a rural village in central Thailand (1994). In Terwiel's study *khwan* is mentioned only twice and *baasii* once.

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goddess and to deal with her sensitivity to being honored. In ways that mirror *khwan* rituals for people, the *khwan* of the rice is in need of strengthening and assurance that it is loved and respected.

Ruth-Inge Heinze approaches the study of *khwan* and *khwan* rituals in Thailand in a socio-psychological, functional way. Her study is based on extensive library research, interviews with Thai students studying in the United States, and several *khwan* rituals that she observed in Thailand. She argues that *khwan* rituals, though original to the *Tai* speaking peoples, have undergone change as they have accommodated Brahmanism and Buddhism. She acknowledges that while many Thai are aware of the origins of the various parts of *khwan* rituals, no one is troubled by its eclectic nature (Heinze 1982:xi). Heinze concludes that *khwan* rituals function so that:

> Harmony is restored and assured (1) between the individual and his psyche; (2) between the individual and his society; (3) between the individual and the supernatural; and (4) between the individual and the universe (1982:94).

As was shown earlier in this chapter, Tambiah's study of religion in a northeast Thai village is done through an analysis of the symbolic structure of their religious ritual systems. *Khwan* rituals, he argues, may possibly be "a teaching or indoctrinating device in the appropriate social context" (1970:229).[64] His exegesis of these rituals moves through four levels that ask questions about the various kinds of *khwan* rituals. First, he considers the "occasion," or the circumstances that have made it necessary to hold the ritual. Second, he considers the situation and state of mind of "the receiver" of the ritual

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[64] The Lao generally use the terms *suukhwan* or *baasii* as cover terms for *khwan* rituals. I am using the term *khwan* rituals because *suukhwan* and *baassii* can individually also refer to a specific kind of *khwan* ritual.

message. Third, he looks at the characteristics of "the sender" of the ritual message and "the supporting cast" of witnesses (e.g., angels, gods, spirits, and so on), which bring about the effectiveness of the message. The fourth aspect is "the message" itself, which must be decoded in terms of ritual objects, actions, and words (1970:229-230).

Tambiah understands *khwan* rituals to be "prophylactic *cum* therapeutic" (author's italics, 1970:243). He concludes that *khwan* rituals are "held not so much to cure a disease--organic or mental (madness)--but to charge or restore morale, especially at rites of passage or situations of transition . . . [In these cases] society attributes to the celebrant the state of mind in question; essentially the ritual is devised to say something to the celebrant and to create in his mind certain effects" (1970:241).

Tambiah considers *khwan* rituals in light of his argument that the Lao religious ritual system is experienced as a unified whole. This point is made best in his analysis of the reciprocal relationship between the *mawphawn* (sometimes called a *Pham* or "Brahman") and the Buddhist monk. His explanation is also relevant in Laos, as described in the following:

> Village youth become temporary monks before marriage to make merit for their elders and community members. . . . In a sense it is the sacrifice of this human energy that produces ethical vitality which can counter *karma* and sufferings. The young are appropriate agents because they are not yet householders. They are the agents of merit-transfer to the old, who are facing imminent death. And after the death of the elders, they continue to perform the same role of transferring merit to them. While the young are going through monkhood it is the elders and householders who support them and who play the leading lay roles in Buddhist rites. Although monks are segregated from their families, yet it is their elders who mainly support them through gift giving. Womenfolk cook and serve them food, and continue to nurture their brothers and sons who are monks. Male elders organize collective rites and act as lay ritual leaders in most village rites, except in the case of mortuary rites in which the filial generations (*luuk-laan*) are called upon to play the major ritual roles, for it is they who will succeed the elders and it is they who will remember the dead. In the life-affirming *khwan* rites, the *phuu thaw* [old ones] perform a vital ritual

service to their *luuk-laan*. Here the parental generation initiates the young into various statuses and helps them assume the role of successful householders. They in fact transfer their protective power and authority to their successors. There is power in old age which the young must rely upon in order to enjoy a prosperous life, just as much as there is a vitality in youth which the old must transmute into *bun* (merit), long life and good rebirth (1970:259-260).

R. B. Davis understands there to be three kinds of *khwan* rituals: the strengthening of the *khwan* ritual, (done after an "arduous" task such as after a midwife delivers a baby); recalling the *khwan*, (as in general *khwan* rituals that bless the recipient); and calling the *khwan* for healing (1984:144). He also provides another important reference to a myth related to the goddess of rice in connection with the *suukhwan* ritual for rice. He argues that the goddess is felt by the nothern Thai to be the primary sustainer of life, pointing to the belief that she has more *bunkhun* ('meritorious benevolence toward others') than other beings. While the myth associated with the rice goddess varies from place to place, they consistently point out that the Buddha and the human world have always been sustained by rice, and that the rice goddess has, from time to time, been offended by those that she sustains. It is therefore important to show appreciation and to provide her with emotional strength by calling and blessing the *khwan* of the rice (see Nathalang 1999).

Finally, Stephen Sparkes has written an important article for *khwan* ritual studies by considering social change in the context of a *khwan* ritual done for a Mitsubishi pickup truck in northeast Thailand.[65] Through analogy and substitution, the *mawphawn* is able to fit a piece of Japanese technology into the cosmology of the local people by attributing to it *khwan*. Using the myths of the past as a reservoir of symbols, the priest is

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[65] While I have not seen this done in Laos, some Lao friends assure me that they have seen it done.

able to liken the pickup to the chariot that carried *Gautama* Buddha outside the temple walls where he experienced suffering for the first time and as a result, went on the quest for enlightenment (1997:67). The vehicle is also likened to the chariot that carried *Pha Veetsandoon* (a previous incarnation of the Buddha) back to the golden city in an act of triumph. The chariot here becomes the symbol of bearing a spiritual hero and the restoration of status and wealth. These are all primary concerns for the owner of the pickup who intends to use it as a mini-bus to earn a living. Since deadly accidents are fairly common in the region, the presence of *khwan* signals auspicious protection and an assurance of economic prosperity (Sparkes 1997).

Sparkes demonstrates the way in which there are "no clear boundaries between the car, the *khwan* of the car, the driver and his *khwan*. This is because all four elements interact when the car is being driven" (1997:68). It is also a clear indication of how the Lao conceive of the interdependence between humans and the things they depend upon to make a living.

The only apparent weakness with Sparkes' analysis is his conclusion regarding the meaning of *khwan* itself. *Khwan*, he says, "is evidence that a certain person or object is "vital," contains the ability to sustain or destroy life" (1997:63). This is a slightly misplaced observation. Sparkes is trying to deal with the fact that the Lao and the Thai attribute *khwan* to humans and a few inanimate objects. The problem is why *khwan* is attributed to some objects and not others. As I will show in Chapter 6, a structural analysis demonstrates that *khwan* is attributed to all objects that contribute to the sustaining of human life. There does not seem to be any good reason for Sparkes' suggestion that objects with *khwan* are characteristically able to destroy life. The pickup

truck has *khwan* because it is its owner's means to making a living. In nothern Laos, silkworms are said to have *khwan* for the same reason.

Literature on Lao *Khwan* Rituals

Georges Condominas studied Lao religion from a social anthropological point of view. Buddhists, he says, regarded the establishment of the Lao Kingdom as a victory for Buddhism over the *phii* cult that existed among the original Austroasiatic peoples of the land.[66] Yet he also acknowledges that the *phii* cult was found among *Tai* peoples before and after they were Buddhists. Its influence, he says, can be seen in the belief in *khwan*. Today the *phii* cult and Buddhism are completely syncretized. Condominas (1998) argues that *khwan* rituals function therapeutically, while Buddhism handles funeral rituals. He lists *khwan* rituals under his section on village healers, along with herbalists, shamans, and mediums (1987:452; 1998:201).

The most thorough study of Lao *khwan* rituals may be that of Zago (1972), a French Catholic priest. His study of Lao religious rituals uses a phenomenological approach and considers symbolic structure (e.g., 1972:377), social function (e.g., 1972:355-358), and the symbolism of Lao religion (e.g., 1972:346-355). He argues that Buddhism in Thailand had a secularizing influence upon *khwan* rituals that reduced their

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[66] *Phii* in Lao refers to spirits. It can be used in reference to the spirit of one's own deceased ancestors, guardian spirits (often very old and revered ancestor spirits), and other spirits of which little is known. The words *khwan*, *vinnyaan,* and *phii* overlap in that they are all unseen spirits. *Khwan* is sometimes referred to as a kind of *vinnyaan* or even as *phii*. A person who serves as a bridge between spirits, a medium, and those seeking advice is called a *Naang Thiam* in Vientiane but *khwan cham* in Luang Prabang (Trankell 1999b:196). Strictly speaking, *vinnyaan*, a Buddhist word, refers only to one's consciousness. In some cases *vinnyaan* is used in a Buddhist context to refer to what, in non-Buddhist contexts, would be called *phii* (Trankell 1999b:195). Buddhist philosophy treats the idea of *phii* as a lower form of belief in existence (for a discussion on *phii* among the Thai, see Rajadhon 1954:153-178).

vitality and pervasiveness, while in Laos, Buddhism's influence on *khwan* rituals has been weak and the rituals remain effective (1972:170). This is evidenced by the fact that Lao Buddhist monks accommodate *khwan* rituals even while relegating them to a status below that of Buddhist rituals.

Zago comes to seven conclusions regarding *khwan* rituals (1972:163-170). First, like Condominas, he believes that *khwan* rituals have a therapeutic function that helps the recipient deal with the emotional impact of illness. In this role *khwan* rituals mediate between the patient and society. Second, some *khwan* rituals also have a prophylactic function, in that they work to fortify the *khwan* against possible dangers and restore strength. They do this by strengthening the tie between the individual and the community. Third, they have a restorative function. Restoration of norms in *khwan* rituals is done when an ancestral spirit is offended or a taboo is broken. Fourth, some *khwan* rituals function as community celebrations. Fifth, *khwan* rituals integrate the individual into the social and cosmic whole. That is, they assist individuals in knowing how they fit--what their role is--in the local and cosmic world. Sixth, *khwan* rituals are a means of returning to a person's origins, to the memory of their birth, the care of parents, and their roles in the household and the village, in order to restore social balance. Finally, Zago believes *khwan* rituals serve as rites of passage that move the individual and community from risky and out of balance states to safe, balanced states.

Another study that approached Lao *khwan* rituals with a view to finding its social-psychological function was done by Mayoury Ngaosyvathn (1990). *Khwan* rituals, she says, "reestablishes the psychological equilibrium of the individual and that of his or her family as well as that of community members" (1990:289). It is a statement of social

acceptance and respect from the community to the person undergoing the ritual. She continues by arguing that these rituals are not simply a "symbolic apology," but an act of repair, an effort "to reestablish the proper order of things" (1990:289). *Khwan* rituals at a state level have a different function, she claims, but she does not tell us what the difference is. In the end, she concludes that these rituals are a kind of rite of passage marking the important transitions in family life (1990:291).

Evans has considered the way social changes in Lao society have impacted *khwan* rituals. In particular, Evans has been concerned with the impact of communism on the ancient ritual symbolism of the Lao and the use to which the state is putting ritual symbolism in state ceremony (1998, 1999). He argues that in communist Laos today, *khwan* rituals play a fundamental mediating role "between realms of belief and across ethnic boundaries" (1998:78). Evans believes that the "*baasii* in Laos therefore plays an overtly political role as a vehicle for underlining a certain achieved 'solidarity' in a particular enterprise" (1998:81). It has also been used to draw "attention away from the regime's policies" by focusing attention on the hospitality of Lao culture. Among Vientiane Lao, Evans sees a tendency toward individualism that stands in contrast to the more communal aspect of the ritual in rural settings. Finally, *khwan* rituals are one of several rituals that depict a "royal style that brings local ritual into a specifiable relation with royal or court ritual" (Evans 1998:81, quoting Van Esterik, 1980).[67]

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[67] For a short but extensive review of the literature on the *Tai* peoples' belief in *khwan*, see B. J. Terwiel (1978).

CHAPTER 5

KHWAN RITUALS

In this chapter I begin by reporting on the emic meaning of *khwan* rituals. This sheds light on the root metaphors (images) and cognitive classifications related to the cultural domain of *khwan*. Then I analyze these using etic theoretical models from a structural point of view. Finally, the meaning of *khwan* rituals is interpreted in light of my understanding of them at several levels. These steps are deliberately meant to follow the three hermeneutical steps suggested by Ricoeur. This analysis of *khwan* rituals takes the research another step forward in identifying key worldview themes that can assist the communication of the gospel among the lowland Lao people.

Emic Views of *Khwan* Rituals

In order to explore the emic meanings that Lao people apply to *khwan* rituals, I will first discuss the range of meanings that the Lao associate with the word *khwan*. Next, a *khwan* ritual performance is described and explained with the guidance of a *khwan* ritual expert called the *mawphawn*. From there, I move to a discussion of "cover terms" used by the Lao to designate *khwan* rituals. A cover term, according to Spradley, is "the first element of a structural domain" (1979:100). As will be shown, the meanings of these terms are quite fluid. But two important classifications of *khwan* rituals do emerge from the data. The final discussion in this section looks at what specific occasions call for

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performing a *khwan* ritual. Again, these categories are not firm ones. The data shows that the Lao have no set list of *khwan* rituals. The occasions that lend themselves to being identified show the flexible nature of *khwan* rituals. This flexibility has allowed for the rituals to maintain their relevance for Lao people in spite of social change.

The Meaning of *Khwan*

The word *khwan* (¢¸ñ-) in the Lao language predates the Lao experience with Buddhism, and is found among all *Tai* speaking peoples in Southeast Asia (Bailey 1998). It may be related to the Chinese word *khwun* which means "soul" or "spirit" (Rajadhon 1962:120).[1] In the Lao language the word *khwan* has a range of meanings. It can refer to things that are loved or adored by a person as in the couplets *luukkhwan* (ìø¡-¢¸ñ-) meaning "beloved child," and *miakhwan* (À´ñ¨-¢¸ñ-) meaning "beloved wife" (see Awnmanisawn 1992).[2] It also forms part of the phrase used to refer to a gift *khawngkhwan* (¢°¤-¢¸ñ-). This word might be literally translated "gift from the heart." The more important (yet related) meaning of *khwan* refers to a person's soul, morale, happiness, and health. Admittedly, these four words cover a great deal of conceptual

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[1] Zago quotes from French and Thai scholars who define *khwan* as "vital spirit, soul," "private reality of body, inherent life of men and animals which enters at the moment of their birth," and the tuft of hair at the top of the head where the *khwan* spirit enters and exits the body. His own explanation is that "*khwan*s are the reason and condition of progress, of what is good, of what is fortuitous" (1972:130-136). Tambiah defines it as "spirit essence" (1970:223). Abhay (1959:128) and Condominas (1998:106) translate *khwan* as simply "soul." R. B. Davis translates it as "psychic energy elements" (1984:61). Terwiel suggests that *khwan* may mean, "'ego,' 'soul,' 'morale,' 'grace,' or 'prosperity'" (1994:42) and Sparkes follows Heinze who translates "life essence" or "essence of life" (1997:60-61).

[2] It should be noted that this Lao dictionary's entry for *khwan* is a word-for-word quote of the entry for *khwan* in the *Isan-Thai-English Dictionary*, compiled by Preecha Phinthong (1989).

space. But it seems impossible to separate the four ideas and still talk about *khwan* properly from a Lao perspective (see Kerr 1972).

Of sixty Lao respondents to the question, "What is *khwan*?"[3] thirty-one defined it as morale *kamlangchay* (¡¿-ìñ¤-Ã¥) or heart *chitchay* (¥ò©-Ã¥), another twenty-two respondents said it was an actual spiritual entity, a kind of *vinnyaan*.[4] Nine respondents described *khwan* as something primarily related to the body and another fourteen said it was related to a person's health (see Appendix B).[5]

It is important to remember that while respondents' answers to the questionnaire emphasized one aspect of *khwan* over another, it is doubtful that many would have denied the different aspects of *khwan* pointed out by other respondents. The fluid nature of the emic meaning of *khwan* can be seen in the following two examples. A twenty-year-old male from Vientiane Province (with rural experience)[6] explained *khwan* this way,

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[3] In deciding how to record answers on the tables in Appendices A, B, C, and D, I used key words but in some cases answers were recorded in a category without the key word if the response seemed to clearly fit that category. Respondents were encouraged to respond individually and thoroughly. They were paid $3.10 US to fill out the forms. Among the sixty Lao respondents seventeen were born in the northeast (Xieng Khuang and Hua Phan), twenty-two were born in central Laos (Luang Prabang, Sayabuly and Vientiane), thirteen were born in Vientiane Municipality, and eight were born in Southern Laos (Khammuane, Savannakhet, and Salavan). Twenty-four of the respondents were women and thirty-six were men (see Appendix A and E for profiles of respondents). A sample of the questionnaire appears in Appendix H.

[4] *Vinnyaan* is a Pali Buddhist word that refers to the spirit of a human being. It is normally only used in reference to the spirit of the dead. More will be said about its meaning below.

[5] Included in the nine responses that suggested a connection with the body, three respondents said *khwan* was primarily personal physical strength, four said it was related to the body, while *vinnyaan* was related to the mind. Two others said that *khwan* was related to the physical body while *vinnyaan* was related to the body's five senses.

[6] Urban experience was attributed to those respondents who had lived in Vientiane Municipality for at least five years before the age of twenty-five. Forty-one of the respondents fit this category and of these, thirty-four said they could read Thai, (a characteristic common to Lao who have lived in the municipality for a length of time). This also reflected a more educated than typical sample of Lao since only 27 percent of the municipality's population can read Thai (Institute of Cultural Research 1999:57). The answers of those who had urban experience differed very little from those without it. As can be seen from the data, this may have been because those with rural experience actually had a number of college

Khwan is our inner thoughts that we believe is a thing that lives in us, it is our way of

thinking and morale" (Questionnaire Respondents [QR] #19).[7] Another thirty-one-year-

old male from Vientiane Province (with urban experience) said, "[*Khwan*] is our way of

thinking of our *vinnyaan*. Our desire for goodness, beauty, good luck, and well-being that

we hope will become a reality" (QR #26).[8] *Mawphawn* Somchit summarizes the meaning

of *khwan* this way:

> *Khwan* is *phii khwan*.[9] It is the one who takes care of us and lives with us.
> We are afraid that *khwan* will flee from us when we have had a car
> accident or when something goes wrong in our lives and so we recall
> *khwan* to us. In the most general sense, *khwan* is our happiness (£¸¾´-©ó-
> Ã¥). We have our *khwan* with us when we have good health, good
> appetite, and satisfaction (£¸¾´-²ð-Ã¥) in our lives (Somchit #1, 2001).

The *mawphawn* are normally former Buddhist monks who have the ability to

chant well and who know the ritual details that need to be observed. As a result, the Lao

books written on *khwan* rituals are typically written by monks and describe *khwan* rituals

in the context of the larger religious ritual system. One such manual by P. Phuangsaba

explains the word *khwan* in the following way:

> Before one begins the calling of the *khwan* it is necessary to know what
> the word *khwan* means. . . . [*Khwan*] does not have any form which one
> can see. This kind of *khwan* people call *khwan khiing*[10] and there are

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graduates among them. The rural experienced respondents showed a slightly higher concern for *khwan* rituals that focus on the cultivation of rice. The urban experienced respondents showed a slightly higher concern for *khwan* rituals that deal with monks and the ordination of monks (see Appendixes E, F, and G).

[7] ¢¸ñ--¡Ò-£õ-¥ò©-¦¿--ô¡--¾´-´½-ê¿-¦¡...¤-ê†-À§˚°-¸È¾-¦½-«ò©-µøÈ-Ã--ªö¸-À°¤. Á-¸£ò©-¥ò©-¦¿--ô¡-Áì½-¡¿-ìñ¤-Ã¥.

[8] Á´È--Á-¸£ò©-Áì½-¸ò--¨¾--¢°¤-£ö--À»ö¾   ê†-À»ö¾-µ¾¡-¯¾©-«½-Î¾-¡ñ-®-£¸¾´-©ó, £¸¾´-¤¾´, £¸¾´-´ó-Â§¡, £¸¾´-µøÈ-©ó-´ó-¦÷¡ -Áì½-µ¾¡-Ã¹É-À¯ñ--£¸¾´-¥ò¤.

[9] *Phii* is a Lao word that refers to spirit. The word normally has a negative connotation but it can also be used to describe good, neutral, or evil spirits. See Rajathon's article on *phii* (1954).

[10] *Khwan khiing* refers to *khwan* attached to the body.

thirty-two[11] always resident in every person. *Khwan khiing* is very important and integral to every person. The ancestors believed that if the *khwan* left the body that person would not have their strength. Consequently, the ancestors liked to invite or call the *khwan* to come stay in the body again or one could say they called the *khwan* to secure good fortune. According to the understanding and belief of the ancestors, whenever the *khwan* was in the body, a person was well and did not experience harm or illness, that person had all they needed for happiness/well-being (£¸¾´-¦÷¡) (1992:1).

All humans and some animals have *khwan*. The animals that have *khwan* are those that provide for humans in some way. For example, buffalo have *khwan* because they plow the rice fields, cattle because they provide the fertilizer for the rice fields, dogs because they help protect the village, elephants because they work for humans, and silkworms because they provide silk. The only plant said to have *khwan* is rice (Somchit #2:2001).[12]

The relationship of the word *khwan* to *vinnyaan* is complex, and there is disagreement and some confusion among the Lao interviewed. The Lao inherited the word *vinnyaan* from Buddhist *Pali* sacred texts. *Khwan*, on the other hand, is an ancient *Tai* word. *Vinnyaan*, technically speaking, means "consciousness," but is used in

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[11] The number thirty-two is taken from Buddhism that teaches that there are thirty-two aspects to the body. The Lao groups less influenced by Buddhism provide different numbers. Somchit told me that there were thirty-six *khwan* in the front of the body and fifty-six in the back (Somchit #2, 1999). He is originally from Hua Phan where there are many Black *Tai* who never converted to Buddhism. The Black *Tai* who propitiate their ancestors give the same numbers as Somchit.

[12] In relating this, Somchit referred to the *khun* (£÷-) that animals have towards humans. This word
(sometimes used in the couplet *bun-khun*) always indicates meritorious virtue towards someone and results in the recipient's obligation to the one who gives it. Thai scholar Chai Podhisita defines *bunkhun* as "any good thing, help or favor done by someone which entails gratitude and obligation on the part of the beneficiary" (1998:47).

everyday language to indicate a person's soul at the time of death.[13] But twenty-two of sixty Lao respondents claimed *khwan* was a kind of *vinnyaan*. Eighteen others said *khwan* and *vinnyaan* were the same thing (some gave both answers). Meanwhile, thirty-six people disagreed, saying that they were not the same. Some stated that *khwan* leaves a person's body during life with bad consequences but *vinnyaan* only leaves a person's body when the person is dead (see Appendix B). One respondent (QR #35) and several others mentioned that *khwan* is attached to the body (but can become detached), while *vinnyaan* is a spirit that flies about (I assume they were thinking of when a person dies). One respondent (age forty-seven with rural experience) said that *vinnyaan* appears at the time of death, while *khwan* is the mental strength of the person all during their life (QR #46). Another respondent explained that *khwan* leaves when it is lured or tricked away from the body by a *phii* or when it is frightened and flees from the body (QR #47).[14]

This apparent confusion may stem from the historical interaction between traditional *Tai* animistic beliefs and Buddhist teaching. Ancient *Tai* culture seems to have only known the word *khwan* before it interacted with Buddhism and adopted the word *vinnyaan*. The Black *Tai*, who have preserved a good deal of ancient *Tai* culture, say that *khwan* is a plural entity that may leave during life, causing ill fortune and weakness and this is remedied by recalling the *khwan*. At death the Black *Tai* believe that the *khwan* break up into groups, some going to heaven, others taking up residence in the local ancestral shrine (Chantha 1999; also see Sparkes 1997:61).

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[13] Kerr's definition indicates the fluid nature of the meaning of *vinnyaan* in providing four meanings: 1) spirit, soul; 2) feeling, consciousness; 3) life; and 4) mind, knowledge, enlightenment (1972).

[14] Rajadhon associates *vinnyaan* and *khwan* closely. "Naturally anything that has a spirit has also a *khwan*" (1962:120; cf. Sparkes 1997).

Since Buddhism became important in Lao culture and society, the word *khwan* has had to adapt to make room for the concept of *vinnyaan*. Today the Lao tend to associate the *khwan* of a person with the issues of life, while they associate the *vinnyaan* of a person with the issues of death and the afterlife. This is shown in *khwan* rituals by the use of the symbols of "cooked" (À¢í¾-¦÷¡) and "uncooked rice" (À¢í¾-¦¾-), while in Buddhist funeral and merit-making rituals, puffed rice is a primary symbol.[15]

Khwan Ritual Performance

Below I describe the ritual process in terms of auspicious directions, numbers, time, and performance. This report was compiled from an interview with *mawphawn* Somchit and notes from a *suukhwan awkkam* (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--°°¡-¡ñ´) ritual that I participated in (Somchit #6, 2001 and Bailey 2001). The *suukhwan awkkam* ritual is performed after a mother has given birth to a child and has completed the required number of days of being confined to a bed near hot coals (to purify and heal her).

Auspicious Direction, Numbers, and Time

As in all Lao rituals, *khwan* rituals are sensitive to auspicious direction, numbers, and time. For example, in the wedding *suukhwan* the couple is always seated with the husband on the right (the auspicious and noble side) and wife on the left. In the *suukhwan*

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[15] I asked several Lao informants but the only explanation I received for this practice was, "It is traditional to use them." Tambiah's interpretation is that puffed rice is a symbol for death because it cannot reproduce grain any longer (1970:183). Uncooked rice, on the other hand, has the potential of fertility. Cooked rice seems to represent the feasting of the *khwan* itself and is a symbol of well-being.

to dedicate a new home, care is taken in construction to pattern the home along auspicious directions and space.[16]

Numbers are also of vital concern. There should not be an even number of bowls of gifts (*maakpāng*) to the *khwan* on the *phaakhwan* (except at weddings, when everything should be in pairs).[17] One should not plan to have a *khwan* ritual on a date with an even number. Furthermore, one must consider the lunar day before scheduling. The first, third, eleventh, and thirteenth days of the lunar months are auspicious times for rituals. These calculations are complex and many things must be considered, including the date of birth of the person whose *khwan* is to be called. Normally the date is chosen by the *mawphawn* who is skilled in making these calculations (Somchit #3, 2001).[18] Additionally, the cotton strings used to tie the *khwan* to the wrist of the ritual recipient are prepared in the auspicious numbers of five, seven, or nine strands (Wechkama 2002).

Ritual Community, Words, and Actions

All *mawphawn* follow a basic ritual structure in conducting *khwan* rituals, although the Lao do not feel a need to follow the structure strictly. The primary thing in Lao ritual of any kind, no matter what formula is followed, is that it be done with skill (Àëñ©-À¡¤) and beauty (À»ñ©-¤¾´). *Mawphawn* Somchit typically follows the following ritual formula:

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[16] See Clement (1982) and Clement-Charpentier (1982) for a thorough discussion on auspicious directions for the placement and construction of Lao homes.

[17] A *phaakhwan* is a low, oval-shaped, rattan table that normally serves as the family meal table but becomes the *phaakhwan* that holds the ritual items during *khwan* rituals.

[18] Others who can make these calculations are astrologers *mawduu* (Ïð-©ø) and prophets *mawtuaay* (Ïð-ê¸¾¨).

Khwan ritual objects are first placed on a low, oval-shaped, rattan table that normally serves as the family meal table. During the ritual, this table becomes the *phaakhwan*. The *phaakhwan* is prepared by women in the household where the *khwan* ritual is to be performed. The *tonbaasii* (ªí--®¾¦ó), a cone-like structure made of banana leaves (see Appendix L), is built by women in the household or purchased in the market. The *tonbaasii* is a symbol of the Mount Meru, the center of the Buddhist cosmology. Somchit arrives early enough to make sure that the *phaakhwan* and *tonbaasii* have been prepared properly.

On the *phaakhwan* are five bowls with gifts of bagged snacks (bought in the market and imported from Thailand) and bananas. There is also whiskey in a beer bottle, a bottle of water, and a sticky rice basket with steamed sticky rice in it. They are both open; Somchit explained that they must be open to allow the *khwan* access. The *tonbaasii* structure is placed inside a silver bowl *khan* (¢ñ-) that is filled with milled sticky rice *khaosaan*. Auspicious words are written on a piece of paper and placed on the *phaakhwan* to empower the ritual (Bailey 2001).

As friends and relatives arrive they sit in a circle around the *phaakhwan*, leaving space on one side for the person whose *khwan* is to be called and for the *mawphawn* on the opposite side. Traditionally, it is said that in order to hold a *khwan* ritual, elders, parents, relatives, and friends must be present (Somchit #6, 2001).[19]

The ritual begins by lighting the candle on the top of the *tonbaasii* (if there is one) and with an elder tying the wrist of the *mawphawn* with a strand of white cotton string

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[19] The expression in Lao is ªÉº¤-´ó-¦¾´-À«í¾-¦†-Á¡È-´ó-²Ò-´ó-Á´È-´ó-¨¾©-²†--Éº¤-´ó-©¦½-¹¾¨.

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while blessing him with strength and blessing.[20] This is to encourage the *mawphawn* in his duties. The *mawphawn* also receives a token payment of cash that is wrapped in a paper cone with an African marigold flower and a small candle. Then the *mawphawn* and the person whose *khwan* is to be called take a line of cotton string from the *phaakhwan* into their hands in the position of prayer.[21]

The *mawphawn* then begins a series of four prayers.[22] He begins the first prayer with a few lines of *Pali* that are auspicious, and in which he acknowledges the three jewels of Buddhism.[23] He then chants the purpose of the *khwan* ritual, for example, to bless the birth of a child and mother. It is also typical to clearly state that the time of the ritual is an auspicious one and to acknowledge the presence of important people and elders in the congregation as well as various deities such as *Indra*, *Vishnu*, and the angels. The mentioning of the gods (and sometimes even of characters from familiar folk tales and myths) brings to the minds of the hearers the cosmological stories that explain the social and natural order of the world. At the end of this first prayer the *khwan* is invited to the *phaakhwan* and formally presented with the gifts placed on it. As this is done, everyone near enough touches the *phaakhwan* with their right hand. The transition between the first and second phases of the ritual is marked by the congregation saying in

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[20] This candle was traditionally the length of the circumference of the person's head whose *khwan* was to be called. Somchit did not feel that this was observed very often anymore.

[21] In some cases the string is draped down the *tonbaasii* and then passed through the hands of everyone in attendance, increasing the feeling of solidarity. I have witnessed this in both Vientiane Municipality and Hua Phan Province (Bailey 2001).

[22] Somchit said it was not proper to call these prayers *mon* (´ö-) since that is what the monks do. There does not seem to be a technical name for the *mawphawn* prayers other than *phawnkhwan* (²º--¢¸ñ-) or *khwan* blessings.

[23] The three jewels are the Buddha, the *dharma* (Buddhist teachings), and the *sangha*, (the community of monks in the local temple). The acknowledgement of the three jewels is not always done in areas where or on occasions when the ancestral spirits *phii* are more in focus.

unison with the *mawphawn*, "Come *khwan*, come!" (´¾-Àµó-¢ˌñ--Àºó¨). The united call

for the *khwan* to return heightens the feeling of social solidarity, and was for me an

experience similar to a meaningful time of sharing the Christian ritual of the *Eucharist*

(communion).

The second prayer is a blessing on the *khwan* as well as instructions to the *khwan*

to return from the various places that it has wandered.[24] The *mawphawn* appeals to the

khwan to return to its owner. In the case of *suukhwan* for a new mother and infant the

mawphawn might say to the *khwan* of the child:

> How can I describe it to you, *khwan*! When you were born and you had
> not been a short time in your mother's womb, but ten months! Your
> mother's abdomen was in pain during the labor. The relatives came to see
> her. You were causing her stomach pain as your mother lay there and then
> moved into the sitting position as she held her stomach. A girl is born face
> up and a boy is born face down. Your mother was beside herself with
> exhaustion. Her hand wiped your body clean, then she washed you and
> wrapped you in a beautiful cloth. Then she called to the various spirits
> who might claim you to come get you. When they did not take you she
> gathered you into her arms and lay on the fire bed (Ananto 1974:87).

The *khwan* of the infant is attracted by the beauty of the words that describe the

love and suffering of its mother. As this prayer ends the transition phrase is again spoken

in unison by the congregation "Come *khwan*, come!"

The third prayer invites the *khwan* (À§ó--¢ˌñ-) to the *phaakhwan* to feast. The

mawphawn is likely to say, "Come feast *khwan* don't hesitate, don't be shy. Come right

away!" The arrival of the *khwan* is marked by women who sit in the back of the

congregation and toss uncooked rice into the air.[25] The rice is thrown to encourage the

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[24] Remember that the *khwan* is a plural entity but normally spoken of in the singular.
[25] In a *Tai Neua* village in Hua Phan Province I have seen the Lao (male head of household) lift a lighted torch at the time of the arrival of the *khwan*.

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khwan to enter the house, as it might be standing in the doorway, hesitating shyly as it looks over the situation (Somchit #6, 2001).

At the end of this prayer, the *mawphawn* takes some of the offerings (typically an egg, a banana, and some cooked rice) and places it in the hand of the recipient. In this act, Somchit says, the *khwan* is transferred from the *phaakhwan* tray to the person's hand. Then he speaks a blessing on the recipient as he ties the right wrist of the woman and of the baby with cotton string.[26] Meanwhile, the recipient sits passively with her left hand upright in a prayer position. The recipient acknowledges the blessing when the *mawphawn* finishes by raising both hands together in the prayer position to her forehead *nob*. Once the *mawphawn* has tied the main recipient with string and blessed her, others in the congregation do the same for her.

The final prayer is then begun. The *mawphawn* summarizes what has been said and done (still using the chanting style). Then the formal presentation of the *phaakhwan* is made to the person whose *khwan* has been called.[27] When the *mawphawn* has finished his prayer some choice meat is taken from the *phaakhwan* and presented to the *mawphawn* and the recipient. Now everyone takes string from the *phaakhwan* and ties each other's wrists, wishing them health, wealth, and a long life. Everyone eventually has their wrists tied with string and has heard the blessings and good wishes of others before the ritual finishes. Hyperbole marks the blessings. For example, it is typical to hear someone say, "May you be the ruler of thousands!" Respondents to the questionnaire said that when *suukhwan* rituals were held for them they felt happy, encouraged, strengthened,

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[26] In some places the left wrist is tied first and then the right. This may be a Chinese influence.
[27] The *mawphawn* sometimes pushes the tray towards the recipients (Bailey 2001).

loved, proud, healthy, and blessed (see Appendices B and F). When the ritual has concluded, those who are present share a meal.

The Scope of *Khwan* Rituals

In the past I have always referred to *suukhwan* rituals (*suu* means "to beckon"). I now prefer to speak of *khwan* rituals to reflect what I believe to be a broader understanding of the emic domains of *khwan* rituals. I previously understood the term *suukhwan* as a cover term for all *khwan* rituals. My confusion is shared by many Lao themselves, and stems from the fact that *suukhwan* or "the calling of the *khwan*" can refer to a phase in a *khwan* ritual, a particular type of *khwan* ritual, or it can be used as a general cover term for *khwan* rituals. Below, at the top of Table 16, there are three terms that refer to phases that usually occur in a *khwan* ritual: *süenkhwan*, *mawbphaakhwan* and *phuukkhään*.

Süenkhwan is the invitation of the *khwan* to come to the *phaakhwan* and feast, thus returning to its owner as the string on the *phaakhwan* is taken and tied around the wrist of its owner. *Mawbphaakhwan* is a stage in the ritual (normally after the *mawphawn* has tied the wrist of the recipient) when the offerings on the *phaakhwan* are presented as gifts to the *khwan*'s owner. *Phuukkhään* refers to tying the sacred string around the wrist of the person whose *khwan* has been recalled. Before the string is tied to the wrist, it is brushed back and forth over the wrist to sweep away ill fortune and bad spiritual elements and to brush in the good elements.

The fourth term, *suutkhwan*, can refer to a phase in a *suukhwan* ritual when the *mawphawn* strengthens the *khwan* through chanting sacred words *suut* (¦ø©). This is done by the *mawphawn* (who is usually a former Buddhist monk). It may also refer to a ritual performed by a monk to strengthen the *khwan* of an individual. In this latter case, the ritual is not done in the context of *khwan* rituals. Monks do not participate in *khwan*

TABLE 16

***KHWAN* RITUAL TERMS**

Lao Term	Basic Meaning	Usage
À§ó--¢¸ñ- *Süenkhwan*	Invitation to the *Khwan*	A phase in a *khwan* ritual when the *mawphawn* addresses the *khwan* to invite it to the *phaakhwan* and to return to its owner.
'®-²³¾¢¸ñ- *Mawbphaakhwan*	Present *Phaakhwan* Gifts	To formally turn the gifts on the *phaakhwan* tray over to the recipient. It is not completely clear if the *phaakhwan* gifts are at the same time being presented to the *khwan* of that person, or if the *khwan* is understood to be on the tray feasting already.
°ø¡-Á¢- *Phuukkhään*	Attaching the *Khwan*	To tie the wrist with white cotton string; first of the person whose *khwan* has been called and second of all those in attendance. This transfers the *khwan* from the *phaakhwan* to the person's body. A brushing motion is made before tying the string to sweep away bad elements from the body. String tying with words of blessing may constitute a small ritual done all by itself, and this is performed on occasion for children and the elderly when they are ill.
¦ø©-¢¸ñ- *Suutkhwan*	Strengthening the *Khwan*	To strengthen weak *khwan*, such as when someone is ill, has had an accident, is depressed due to a great loss, or has experienced a long string of bad luck, by chanting auspicious words and *Pali* texts. Done by the *mawphawn*/elders in *suukhwan* when it is a phase in a *suukhwan* ritual, and by monks themselves in a separate ritual.
¦øÈ-¢¸ñ- *Suukhwan*	Calling the *Khwan*	A phase in a *khwan* ritual when those praying are ready to call the *khwan* back from places they have wandered (similar to inviting the *khwan* above). Also used to refer to a kind of *khwan* ritual that is normally done for those who are ill. Meat is also typically used as an offering to the relevant spirits, and the *tonbaasii* may or may not be used.
®¾-¦ó *Baasii*	Honoring the *Khwan*	To honor and strengthen *khwan* that are already strong and experiencing good luck, and to protect against the bad luck that could be caused if jealous spirits lure the *khwan* away. Used especially for monks, Buddha images, foreign guests, and government officials.
»¼¡-¢¸-ñ- *Hiakkhwan*	Calling (capturing) the *Khwan* from the place it was lost	To recall the *khwan* lost in a particular locality. Usually done for the seriously ill. A small fish net is used to scoop the *khwan* up and return it to its owner. This type of *khwan* ritual is often prescribed by a shaman *mawyao*, and in this context Somchit referred to *khwan* as *phiikhwan*.

¦øÈ-¢¸ñ---É°¨ *Suukhwan Noy*	Calling the *Khwan* (small ritual)	Used to call the *khwan* or strengthen the *khwan* by elders, without a *mawphawn*. It is a simple ritual done to deal with illness, the rice, or the buffalo.

rituals or any other rituals that honor *phii*. But the monks can perform a private *suutkhwan* at the temple for an individual (cf. QR #46). This ritual is rather spontaneous and includes advising and/or counseling individuals. Similar to other *khwan* rituals, in a *suutkhwan* ritual the monk chants a sacred text and ties a sacred string around the wrist of the individual.

The fourth term, *suukhwan*, as mentioned above, can refer to a phase in the ritual, but it usually denotes a specific kind of *khwan* ritual that is oriented towards healing and that sometimes recognizes the presence of household ancestors spirits *phii*.

The next three terms, *baasii, hiakkhwan*, and *suukhwan noi* all refer to particular kinds of *khwan* rituals. There are then five kinds of *khwan* rituals: *baasii*, *suukhwan*, *hiakkhwan, suukhwan noi*, and *suutkhwan*. *Suukhwan*, and sometimes *baasii*, often double as cover terms for the rest.[28]

According to *mawphawn* Somchit, the *baasii khwan* ritual is meant to honor some one of importance by calling their *khwan*. In this context, calling the *khwan* is a means of blessing the person, since the presence of *khwan* indicates well-being.[29] It is typically done for visiting foreigners, the local temple abbot, and elderly persons of prestige in the village (especially during Lao New Year). It requires a *mawphawn* to serve as ritual

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[28] In northeastern Laos (Huaphan Province), the term used is *aakhwan* (°É¾-¢¸ñ-). It is a ritual also done typically for a small child. A *phaakhwan* is used, but there is no use of *maakpāng* offerings (which are probably Brahman in origin). Instead, boiled eggs and chicken are used. This term (*aa*) is also used in northern Laos in reference to house spirits as in the phrase *phiihüan* (°É¾-°ó-À»õ°-).

[29] Well-being is being used to translate the broad and important word *khwaamsuk* (£¸¾´-¦÷¡).

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specialist, and most of the friends and family of the individual to be present. The word *baasii* comes from the Khmer term *baysii*, which means auspicious rice (rice offered to the spirits).[30] This Khmer relationship is understood to be Brahman, and the hierarchical structure of Brahman court ritual is symbolized in the tree-like structure on the *phaakhwan* known in Lao as the *tonbaasii*. The *baisii* ritual in Cambodia is performed as a healing ritual and as a means of honoring people in the community (Nhep 2000 and Strong 2000).[31]

Baasii rituals in Laos are the ideal means of honoring an important person. They are unique in at least five ways. First, *baasii* rituals normally require that a *mawphawn* be in attendance. Second, as is also true in strictly Brahmin rituals, the *phaakhwan* typically does not have meat offerings on it for the spirits. Instead, there are offerings of rice, eggs, flowers, candies, and bananas. These are arranged in five bowls referred to as *maakpāng* (Ï¾¡-À®ñ¤).[32] Third, there is almost always a *baasii* tree *tonbaasii* on the *phaakhwan*. Fourth, if the *baasii* is done for a monk, no mention is made of his *khwan* at all. Somchit reported that this is because the monk is so much higher than the people blessing him. The monk has no fear of his *khwan* becoming weak or departing. His *khwan* is very strong already (Somchit #6, 2001). Fifth, *baasii* was reported by many respondents and by Somchit as being attended by a large number of people.

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[30] Rajadhon says the same (1962:135). I confirmed this in an interview with Arun Sok Nhep, a Cambodian translator (Nhep 2000).

[31] One could hypothesize from this evidence that Lao *khwan* rituals emerged from an historical synthesis between ancient *Tai* healing *khwan* rituals and Khmer *baysii* rituals (that recalled the spirit the Khmer call *proleüng*) that are still practiced among the Mon-Khmer speaking groups in Laos, such as the Khmu. I can only speculate that its use to honor important people emerged from the association of Brahman rituals with the royal court that is still strong today in Thailand and was evident in the Lao royal court before 1975.

[32] The number of bowls must be odd, for example, three, five, or seven.

Suukhwan rituals tend to be healing rituals, but some *suukhwan* rituals are done to honor elders in the village (but not monks).[33] In this case, honoring the person takes the form of blessing them through the feasting and strengthening of their *khwan*. This is logical, since the presence of one's *khwan* is equal to one's well-being.

Somchit and several respondents to the questionnaire said that one distinguishing feature of *suukhwan* was the presence of meat offerings on the *phaakhwan*. Among the lowland Lao this offering is always a whole chicken, but among the northern *Tai*-Lao groups, such as the Black *Tai*, a small pig is preferable.[34]

Another characteristic was said to be that *suukhwan* did not necessarily need a *mawphawn*. A local elder or group of elders could perform it. A third distinction made was that *suukhwan* did not require the presence of a large representation of the kinship community.[35] It could be performed with a small group of friends and family present. *Suukhwan* rituals are clearly the most flexible of the four kinds of *khwan* rituals. They can be done to honor a person, to strengthen and encourage a person, or to heal a person. Healing in this context is understood as both physical and emotional. This can be seen in the performance of *suukhwan* for those who are physically ill and for those who are emotionally distressed (for example, after an accident or the loss of a loved one).[36]

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[33] Seventy percent of the sixty respondents said *baasii* and *suukhwan* rituals were different (see Appendix D). Some of those who said they were the same stated that they only differed in that there was a *mawphawn* in attendance at the *baasii* and not at the *suukhwan*. Others said they were exactly the same. This may be because many Vientiane Municipality Lao use the terms *baasii* and *suukhwan* interchangeably.

[34] I am very curious about this preference. Why chicken and why pork? These are questions that further research might pursue.

[35] Close friends are often considered kin and would be included in this community.

[36] One woman from Hua Phan referred to a *mawaa* (Ïð-ºÉ¾) and a *mawsüe* (Ïð-À§ó) as the experts who perform *suukhwan* for family and *suukhwan* for the ill, respectively (QR #27).

Suukhwan for the ill can include the feasting of the *khwan* and the ancestors who have been offended and who may have lured the *khwan* away (Amphone 2000 and QR #60). In this case, an elder or shaman *mawyao* (Ïð-Àμö¾) has diagnosed that the illness or accident was the result of an offended ancestor in the household. To appease this spirit, a promise is made that if the individual recovers the ancestor will be feasted. When the promise or contract, *baphii* (®½-°ó), is made, a single string is tied around the wrist of the ill person. This testifies to his or her obligation to the contract with the spirit.[37]

When the person recovers, a *suukhwan* is held. The ancestor who was offended and the individual's *khwan* are both feasted at the *phaakhwan*. The use of *suukhwan* to appease offended parties is also illustrated in the *suukhwan* done for a farmer's buffalo (used for plowing rice fields) and for the rice in the fields. Calling the *khwan* of a buffalo or of the rice is done to appease the feelings of both. While the ritual is performed to encourage and strengthen them, the primary concern is with appeasing their feelings. A buffalo may have been offended when the farmer beat the buffalo during plowing. The rice may have been offended by being threshed roughly in the fields. Should the *khwan* of either depart, the buffalo or rice may grow weak or even die, leaving the farmer in a terrible situation. *Suukhwan* rituals focus on the restoration of relationships between people, and between them and the ancestors, the buffalo, and the rice.[38]

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[37] I know of one case in which a woman's parents made a contract with a spirit to heal her as a child from a serious illness, and in exchange she was bound to serve that spirit the rest of her life. She will be killed by this spirit if she breaks the contract. While her husband has converted to Christianity, she has not, because of this contract.

[38] *Suukhwan* rituals are also done for oxen, silkworms, carts used to transport rice, and even taxicabs.

Hiakkhwan[39] (*hiak* means "to call") rituals are specifically done for those who are ill. When medicine does not restore a person's health, the elders or a spirit doctor may often be consulted. Depending on the diagnosis, the family may be instructed to make an offering to the ancestral spirits, the local guardian spirit (who may have been offended), seek a monk who will *suutkhwan*, or perform a *hiakkhwan* ritual.[40] *Hiakkhwan* rituals precede *suukhwan* rituals. In *hiakkhwan*, a senior family member puts on a piece of clothing that belongs to the ill person in the assumption that this will help attract the *khwan*. Then he or she goes to a location where the ill person was when the illness began (QR #45).[41] From that location they call the *khwan* and using a Lao fishing net *saving* (¦½-¸ò¤) scoop up the lost *khwan*. It is then carried back to the house where the ill person is lying, and is placed on the person. Afterwards, a *suukhwan* ritual is often held to feast the *khwan* and to counsel it to stay with its owner (cf. QR #34).

Suukhwan Noi refers to the act of chanting auspicious words to the *khwan* of a person (usually a child) to protect them against harm and illness. It is done by an elder or the head of the household with little ritual preparation, and without inviting guests to come as witnesses (Somchit #6, 2001). Strings are tied around the wrist of the recipient, but in most cases, the *phaakhwan* is not prepared.

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[39] *Hiakkhwan* rituals are sometimes called *sawn khwan* (¦É°-) (see Phuangsaba 1992:4).

[40] It seems to be a pattern to deal with depression, illness, and bad luck in a step-by-step way, switching between alternative therapies. For example, one young man (age nineteen) said that when he feels that his *khwan* has fled, he first spends time with friends to forget his troubles. If that does not solve the problem he then seeks his parents' advice; they tend to prescribe medicine (traditional usually, but also Western). If this still fails to bring back the feeling of the presence of *khwan*, then he seeks the advice of his grandparents (or respected elders in his community) and they arrange for a *suukhwan* ritual (QR #20).

[41] It is interesting to note that while a *baasii* and *suukhwan* are always led by men, both *hiakkhwan* and *suukhwan noi* are sometimes done by women. I once witnessed a group of women perform a *khwan* ritual together after their return to Laos from the US. There were no men present (cf. Bailey 1998:33). Several questionnaire respondents noted that a mother often performs *hiakkhwan* on behalf of her ill child.

Occasions for *Khwan* Rituals

The respondents to the questionnaire were asked to list the occasions that called for *suukhwan* rituals that they knew of, and to explain them.[42] Of the sixty responses, there were no two lists alike. Some twenty-two occasions were cited in all (see Appendices C and D). The most often cited by a significant margin was *suukhwan dong* (weddings). Next in line was New Year's Day *suukhwan*, often referred to as a *baasii*. The purpose of both of these rituals is to honor and protect the *khwan* against future adversity (QR #15).

The next six most often cited rituals were (in order), for a new mother and child, before a long trip, after a long trip, during an illness, after an accident or illness, and to dedicate a new house. The first, fourth, and fifth rituals are clearly healing rituals. The second and third rituals deal with people who cross thresholds. In these rituals the concern is for the possibility that a person's *khwan* might be frightened in the new place, miss home to the point of illness, or grow too fond of the distant place and not return home. Being away from home increases the danger of illness (emotional and physical) and accident. The sixth most-cited ritual deals with the issue of blessing and safety related to a newly constructed home. When a new home is built, one of the main posts is dedicated as the *khwan* post. Its presence signifies well-being in the home.[43]

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[42] Here, *suukhwan* is being used as a cover term for *khwan* rituals.

[43] Compare the list of *khwan* rituals cited by respondents in the questionnaire with the sixteen *khwan* rituals referred to by Phonphranow Temple Research Center (c. 1995). This book, like most Lao ritual manuals, provides various kinds of ritual words and not specifically *khwan* ritual occasions. Nevertheless, the ritual words provided for *khwan* rituals are: engagement (small wedding), wedding, new mother and baby, before ordination, *baasii* for the head abbot, *baasii* for Buddha image, *baasii* for government official; and general *suukhwan* for ordinary people, for a student going abroad to study, for a student who has returned from abroad, for a small child, for an elderly person, for a couple who farms, for an ill person, for a new house, and for an elderly person when they are dying.

While many lay people would not recognize the distinction, two *khwan* ritual specialists condensed the categories of *khwan* rituals into two overall types (Somchit #5, 2001 and Ananto 1974:80).[44] First, *khwan* rituals are done in order to bless or increase the blessing someone is already experiencing, (i.e., *baasii*). Second, *khwan* rituals are done to reverse bad luck or the lack of blessing (i.e., *hiakkhwan*).[45]

The Lao Religious Ritual System

An important part of my research has been to gain insight on how the Lao relate *khwan* rituals to the whole of their religious ritual lives. While Tambiah has described this system in terms of four ritual categories, the Lao speak of them in terms of Buddhist, Brahman, and *phii* rituals. More often, they do not refer to any distinctions at all. People with ritual knowledge, however, can consistently identify at least these three categories. I pursued this information in two ways. First, I discussed it at length with Somchit. Second, I studied several ritual manuals written by Buddhist ritual experts.

When I showed Somchit a list of Lao rituals (it was a representative list of rituals from all three traditions but was not exhaustive) and asked him to categorize them he responded with a good deal of confusion. On the one hand, he (and all the other Lao I questioned) was clear in his mind as to which ones were Buddhist, *phii,* and *Pham*.[46]

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[44] Several respondents, however, also mentioned these two kinds as well (cf. QR #68).

[45] I know of two *khwan* rituals that deal indirectly with death. The first one is done for the relatives of a person who has recently died. It is the only *khwan* ritual in which the household relatives are the only ones tied with string. The other one I know of is *suukhwan luang* and was unknown to many Lao. It is unique in that it is performed for an elderly person when they seem incurably ill. It is done over three consecutive evenings and seems to be focused on emotionally strengthening the ill person and those in the household in the face of the coming death (cf. Lao Department of Literature 1964:29).

[46] *Khwan* rituals are often referred to as *Pham* or Brahman rituals.

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Even as he acknowledged these different traditions that had produced the rituals, he was ill at ease with the request to categorize them separately from one another.

This holistic outlook on Lao ritual traditions was again apparent in the ritual manuals that I studied. One literary genre of ritual manuals is normally titled *Ancient Lao Customs* (or some variation on this title). The content of these manuals typically has the following sections:

1. The twelve customs and the fourteen traditions.[47]

2. Responsibilities of parents to children, children to parents, husbands and wives, and so on.

3. Ritual blessings for important occasions (e.g., engagement rituals).

4. Ritual words for the lay leader of the temple to use when speaking to the monks on behalf of the temple community during merit rituals.[48]

5. Ritual words (chants) for *khwan* rituals.[49]

Somchit was able to associate the different ritual words with the traditions with which they were associated.[50] The manuals, however, do not categorize the words according to the ritual tradition to which they belong.

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[47] The twelve traditions are a list of the religious festivals and rituals that occur in the village during each of the twelve lunar months. The fourteen customs are a list of values and proverbs that a person would be wise to live by.

[48] The lay leader known as *sangkhalii* (¦ñ¤-£½-ìó) or *saalavat* (¦¾-ì½-¸ñ©) is normally someone who was once a monk himself and he often doubles as a *mawphawn* during *khwan* rituals too. The key in both roles is to be able to memorize and repeat the ritual words well for each occasion.

[49] Compare the contents of the following ritual manuals: Ananto (1974); Phonphranow Temple Research Center (c. 1995); Phudthavong (2000); Thammachak and Singvongsa (c. 1997).

[50] There are no published ritual words for *phii* rituals as such, but the *phii* are addressed in Buddhist and *khwan* rituals implicitly through the offerings left out for them and the transferring of merit to them through the pouring out of water on the ground *yaat nam* (µ¾©--Õ) at nearly all merit making
occasions.

I would like to close this section with *mawphawn* Somchit's own words on what *khwan* rituals mean to Lao people:

> It is no small matter to hold a *khwan* ritual. It costs money and requires work. But there is nothing that expresses our happiness more--not feasting, not drinking--than doing *suukhwan* (Somchit #6, 2001).

A Structural Analysis of *Khwan* Rituals

In this section, I follow Ricoeur's hermeneutical method of seeking an objective moment in my interpretation by analyzing the symbolic structures in *khwan* rituals from an etic perspective. This is clearly not a simple linear process but involves a reflecting back and forth between my own assumptions, the emic experiences that the Lao have reported, and the worldless structure of the text of *khwan* rituals.

First, I consider the list of beings and things said to have *khwan* in order to understand the relationship between them. Second, the objects on the *phaakhwan* tray are considered and particular attention is given to the symbols of white cotton string and rice. Next, I look at the structure of the ritual process. Then, I consider etic functional categories that emerge from looking at the occasions that call for *khwan* rituals. Finally, I consider the relationship between *khwan* rituals and the larger religious ritual system.

Who and What Has *Khwan*?

In Table 17 I list the beings (other than humans, who of course, all have *khwan*), and things that are said to have *khwan*, and the roles that they play in Lao life. The list in Table 17 contains non-human entities that the Lao told me have *khwan*. There is not always agreement among the Lao on the list. I will comment further on this disagreement

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below. The list below is probably not exhaustive. The presence of taxicabs on the list shows that the qualifications for having *khwan* are somewhat flexible with the context. This structural picture is given in an attempt to reveal a deeper meaning to the presence of *khwan*.

TABLE 17

NON-HUMAN ENTITIES WITH *KHWAN*

Entity with *Khwan*	Role in Lao Life
Buffalo	Pulls the plow in the rice fields to prepare for planting.
Ox	Pulls the rice cart and fertilizes the rice fields.
Silkworms	Provides silk for ritual clothing and for sale in local markets.
Rice	Basic human nourishment.
Rice Cart	Carries rice seedlings, the elderly and children to and from the fields, and the rice harvest back to the village.
Taxicab	Carries people and provides a means of livelihood for its owner.

At first it seems odd that the Lao attribute *khwan* to non-humans and even some objects. It immediately raises the question "Why these animals and these objects and not others?" It is important to note before going any further that the animals that have *khwan* cannot be used as offerings on the *phaakhwan*. In the same way, the animals whose meat is used in this way do not have *khwan* (e.g., chickens and pigs).

The animals that have *khwan* all have this in common: they play crucial roles in the sustaining of human life. Normally this means they are used in rice cultivation. Silkworms are an exception. In areas where silkworms are raised as a regular source of income, villagers claim that they have *khwan*. Women are more likely than men to

recognize that silkworms have *khwan*. This is not surprising, since raising silkworms is primarily a female occupation.

The vehicles listed in the table share an attribute that the animals have. They serve the main occupation that sustains human life. In the case of the rice cart it is in pulling the rice and carrying the two most vulnerable members of the human village community (e.g., children and the elderly). In the city, taxicabs fit this category because they serve as the main livelihood of their owners.

This first-level analysis strengthens the association of *khwan* with human life, as shown in Tambiah's model of his four religious rituals. There he argues for an opposition between *khwan* and *vinnyaan* that parallels the opposition between life and death. This is true even when *khwan* is attributed to non-human entities.

Phaakhwan Objects

The *phaakhwan* is a tray constructed with bamboo and rattan that is roughly thirty centimeters high. In everyday use, it is the family meal table but during a *khwan* ritual all the offerings, gifts, candles, and flowers used to attract the *khwan* are placed on it.[51] It serves as the central point of reference during the ritual with everyone in attendance seated around it on the floor. Below, Tables 18 and 19 list and explain the various objects placed on the *phaakhwan*. In the case that a *tonbaasii* is used there are then two categories of items, the *tonbaasii* (Table 18) and the *maakpāng* (Table 19) or food

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[51] For the symbolism of the objects on the *phaakhwan* see Ngaosyvathn (1990) and Zago (1972).

offered to the *khwan* (and in some cases, also to household ancestor spirits). From these tables I want to make three points.

First, the use of the *tonbaasii* on the *phaakhwan* normally signals that the goal is to bless and strengthen the *khwan* of the recipient. The *tonbaasii* reflects the more hierarchical cosmology of the Buddhist world that associates itself with the larger political, *müang* powers in the social system. This hierarchy is not consistent with the

TABLE 18

***BAASII AND PHAAKHWAN* TRAY RITUAL ITEMS**

Item	Everyday Use	Ritual Use	Ritual Meaning
Baasii Structure (ªí--®¾-¦ó)	Banana leaves are used for wrapping food, as plates to eat off when in the fields, as makeshift rain hats, and so on.	Constructed out of banana leaves, decorated with *dawkdaohüang* flowers (African Marigolds) in a hierarchical fashion. It may be a crude replica of Mount Meru, the center of Lao cosmology and associated with royalty. A candle is attached to its summit.	Points to royalty and the power of *müang* rulers (those with merit). The gods and spirits are included in this category as protectors. They are *saksit* powers.
African Marigold Flowers (©°¡-©¾-À»õ°¤)	Used in all Buddhist ritual events. They are orange, the sacred color of Theravada Buddhism.	Suggests the presence of Buddhist meaning in the ritual	Auspicious moral and *saksit* amoral power.
Candles (ê¼-)	Normally not used, except at rituals. They use another kind of small torch for light in their homes.	Often called the victory candle. Seems to indicate the presence of a spiritual being such as *khwan*. During one *suukhwan* held for me the host lifted the candle into the air when the *khwan* was said to have arrived.	Spiritual presence, victory over misfortune.
White Cotton String (±É¾¨-¢¾¸)	Used to weave clothing. Local product.	Symbolizes a person's heart or feelings *chitchay*. White is the symbol of purity.	Allows the transfer of merit, blessing, and strength from humans to spirits and from spirits to humans.

actual structure of social relations at the village level but is consistently acknowledged by villagers even as they acknowledge their obligation to larger powers. As already stated, a villager's identity is impacted by three levels of social experience, the household, the village, and the *müang*. While hierarchy structures all of Lao social life to some degree, it is most acute at the *müang* level. There is a sense in which the *tonbaasii* as a symbol of

TABLE 19

MAAKPĀNG (Ï¾¡--À®ñ¤) AND MEAT
OFFERINGS ON THE *PHAAKHWAN*

Item	Everyday Use	Ritual Use	Ritual Meaning
Basket of Cooked Sticky Rice (ªò®-À¢í¾-¦÷¡)	This is how rice is served at every meal.	To feast the *khwan.*	Basic nourishment of life is now an offering to *khwan* (and spirits of ancestors in some cases).
Bowel of Raw Rice («É¸¨-À¢í¾-¦¾-)	As seed and as domesticated food.	Always appears at marriage *suukhwan.*	Seems to be associated with fertility.
Bananas (Ï¾¡-¡É¸¨)	Common everyday domesticated food.	Feast the *khwan* and guests.	Offering to *khwan* and spirits of ancestors as compensation.
Sweets (À¢í¾-Îö´)	Normally only made for festivals which are traditionally all religious in nature.	Provided to guests of honor (human and spirits).	Offering to *khwan* and spirits of ancestors as compensation.
Pig's leg (Northern Laos) (¢É¾-Ïø--É°¨)	Normally only eaten during festive occasions which are traditionally all religious in nature.	Feast the *khwan* and guests. Pigs do not have *khwan.*	Offering to *khwan* and spirits of ancestors as compensation.
Boiled Chicken Parts (Ä¡È-ªí´)	Common everyday food but usually eat only small amounts of it. A favored meat.	Feast the *khwan* and guests. Chickens do not have *khwan.* The whole chicken must be used.	Offering to *khwan* and spirits of ancestors as compensation.
Chicken (Duck) Eggs (Ä¢È)	Considered a food that gives strength. There are not many eggs available in a village so they are considered a treat.	Feast the *khwan* and guests.	Offering to *khwan* and spirits of ancestors as compensation. Symbol of life.
Lao Rice Whiskey (Àí¾)	Given to guests, typically males first but also females.	Feast the *khwan* and guests.	Offering to *khwan* and spirits of ancestors as compensation.

Buddhist power also speaks metaphorically to the *müang* powers which traditionally included submission to the king (*müang* ruler).[52]

Evidence for this is clearest in the wedding *suukhwan*. In this ritual the groom is dressed like and plays the role of Rama and the bride that of Sida. These are characters from the Lao version of the *Ramayana* and they are symbols of the ideal man and woman. Without going into further detail I want to argue that the *tonbaasii* is a symbol of the blessing associated with royalty (see Evans 1998:82). Most Lao aspire to this kind of blessing even if they rarely find it.

Second, the moral presence of Buddhism is symbolized in the decorating of the *tonbaasii* with African marigolds, which are used in nearly all Buddhist merit making rituals. The preference for these flowers over others is understood from their orange color that recalls the rusty orange of the monks' robes. The umbrella presence of the Buddhist community and Brahman deities is also felt in that when a *tonbaasii* is used meat does not generally appear in the offerings to the *khwan*.[53] This is not just symbolic of the diet of serious monks and Brahman gods, it also symbolizes the indifference of Buddhist monks to *phii*, which in this case are usually the household ancestor spirits.

Third, in *khwan* rituals in which the *tonbaasii* is not used, the goal often changes from blessing to restoration of some kind. This may be restoration of health, luck, or relationships. In these rituals meat is used because healing and protection involve appeasement of the *khwan,* and very often the ancestor spirits as well.

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[52] Evans' comment that the *phaakhwan* represents Mount Meru and the broader Buddhist cosmology is helpful but the symbol he is speaking of is the *tonbaasii,* not the *phaakhwan* itself (1998:82).
[53] Mulder points out that vegetarian gifts are presented to spiritual beings borrowed from the Brahman cosmology (1979).

A fourth point is that only chicken (and in the north, pork) is offered on the *phaakhwan*. Lao informants uniformly agreed that meat from buffalo and cattle could not be offered and this raised the question, "Why?" No one had an answer, other than tradition. But the structural analysis of entities that have *khwan* revealed that buffalo and cattle are both believed to have *khwan*. They have *khwan* because they have virtue *khun* (75o). They have *khun* because they contribute to the livelihood of humans in the village, and not just any livelihood, but specifically rice cultivation. Rice also has *khwan*. Because they have *khwan* and because of the essential role they play in sustaining life through rice cultivation, rice, buffalo, and cattle are considered part of the village community. Pigs and chickens do not contribute to rice cultivation. On a practical level there are more of them available and villagers can more easily afford offering them.[54]

It may be that pigs and chickens are not categorized as domesticated animals because there are wild varieties of both species. There are wild *paa* (¯È¾) (literally "forest") varieties of both chickens and pigs.[55] There is a distinct fear and respect of all things from the forest and they exist in symbolic opposition to the domestic--civilized--life of the village (R. B. Davis 1984:283). The forest is a source of both power and danger to humans. It is also the habitation of the *phii*.

Fifth, white cotton string is used in most Lao rituals. Below, Table 20 outlines its everyday and ritual roles in Lao life. In everyday use cotton is the basic material grown

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[54] Cattle and buffalo often serve as offerings to the guardian spirit of the village but this offering is made only once a year just before the rice planning season and at the start of the monsoon season. The ritual specialist is known as the *Chao Cham* (g9qhk9e). This person must be a man who has never been ordained as a monk (Somchit #8, 2002).

[55] Actually there is a kind of undomesticated cattle in the forest too but it is referred to by names that are distinct from the Lao names for buffalo and cattle. Wild pigs, however, are called, "forest pig" (ÏøÈ-¯È¾) and wild chickens are called "forest chickens" (Ä¡È-¯È¾).

TABLE 20

ROLE OF COTTON STRING IN LAO COMMUNITY

Context	Role It Plays	Symbolic Meaning	Rituals That Use Cotton String
Clothing	Cotton String is primary material for weaving clothes.	Some Lao say that part of what separates humans from animals is clothing. Clothing is associated with cotton string	*Mawphawn* Somchit said, "The cotton string is like a pure heart" (¦¾¨-±É¾¨-£õ-¡ñ--¦¾¨-¥ò©-Ã¥-ê†-®ð-ìò-¦÷©).
Khwan **Rituals**	Tied around the wrist of the person whose *khwan* is called or strengthened.	Cotton string transfers the *khwan* from the *phaakhwan* tray to the body of the ritual recipient.	All *Khwan* Rituals.
Buddhist Rituals	• Held in the hand of the monk as he chants sacred *Pali* texts who connects it to a candle dripping into a bowel of water. • Held in the hands of monks and attached to the coffin of the deceased as they chant, providing the deceased with merit for the next life. • Encircle sacred space when ridding an area of evil elements.	Transfer of merit and power from the sacred texts to the string held by monks to the candle, wax drips into a bowl of sacred water (*naamhawm*). This sacred water is sprinkled on the person as a blessing. String is also used to encircle a place that is being chanted over for protection against evil or bad luck.	Used in many Buddhist rituals, such as: • Merit for deceased parents (¦‰¤-êÈ¾---¹¾-²Ò-Á´È) • Funerals (¦‰¤-¦½-¡¾-) • House blessing rite (¦ø©-´÷--£÷--À»õº-) • To rid a place of bad luck (¦ø©-Á¡É-À£¾½) • General blessing of individual (¦ø©-ìö©--Õ) sometimes called ¦ø©--Õ-´ö-)
Guardian Spirit Rituals	Protection against evil entities.	Contains merit produced from ritual words and the virtue of the community.	Sixth lunar month/*Bun Bangfay,* ritual to rid the village of evil.
Ancestor Spirit Rituals	String is used to tie around the ancestor objects that represent them. Among the *Phuan* people this is a old pot and a rice cooker.	The string is a way of strengthening and honoring the spirits of deceased ancestors in order to win their favor.	A single string is tied around the house to keep the ancestor spirits of the in-laws from entering the house. String is also tied on the wrist as a sign of a promise made to an ancestor spirit.

and woven by women to make clothing. Its ritual role is to transfer spiritual, unseen realities to seen realities. In *khwan* rituals, the cotton string unites the hearts of the congregation as they pray with the *mawphawn* for the return of the *khwan*. Then it serves to transfer the *khwan* from the *phaakhwan* to the body (wrist) of the recipient. It is also used to brush away bad elements from and to brush good elements into the body of the recipient before the *khwan* is attached.

The role of the cotton string in Buddhist ritual is similar. A line of white cotton string is held in all the praying hands of chanting monks as they chant their powerful *Pali* texts. The end of the string is in some cases attached to a candle that drips its wax into a bowl of perfumed water. This water is then sprinkled on the congregation as a blessing. In funerals (always conducted by Buddhist monks) the string is used to transfer merit to the deceased and to guide the *phii* of the deceased out of the village.

String is also used in the annual village propitiation of the village guardian spirit. During the rocket festival it is used to symbolically enclose the village as sacred space so that the evil of the past year can be swept out of the village. When a small spirit house is dedicated on the household property to house the ancestor parents of the spouse who is not related by blood to the household family, string is placed around the house itself to keep the in-law's ancestor spirits from entering. In rituals to appease ancestor spirits, the Lao *Phuan* people of Xieng Khuang tie string around male and female ancestor pots in the same way that they tie the wrists of the elderly still living in their village. Even in rituals aimed at dealing with evil spirits, string is used, though in this case it is colored red, a color associated with *phii* (Somchit #7, 2001; cf. R. B. Davis 1984:283).

Rice is likewise an important symbol in *khwan* rituals that reappears in most other Lao rituals. Here, I would like to point out again the importance of uncooked and cooked rice as symbols in *khwan* rituals, and also the importance of puffed rice as a symbol of death in Buddhist rituals. This is not to say that all Buddhist rituals are focused on death, but they do tend in that direction. Buddhist merit rituals are primarily opportunities to transfer merit to the ancestors. Only secondarily is merit made for oneself.

Khwan Ritual Process

The analysis of the ritual process reveals four important tendencies at work. First, it shows the liminality of the individual and the communitas experience of the ritual community (E. L. B. Turner and V. Turner 1978). It also shows that the *khwan* is recalled in and through the presence of the community. Finally, the ritual use of crafted words and manipulation of physical elements effects change in the condition of the recipient's life.

Liminality and Communitas

The recipient of the ritual is in a "liminal" position for the duration of the ritual (see Table 21). It is the recipient's *khwan* that is recalled, and this means that the community is focused for the moment on what that person needs--whether that be honor for a recent success, strengthening in the face of a new challenge, or healing from an illness. What sets the recipients apart is their completely passive disposition. Throughout the ritual they say nothing, and make no emotional response, other than to show respect to those who bless them by raising their hands together to their forehead (*nob*). Only when the ritual has finished will the recipient resume normal behavior.

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TABLE 21 APPEARS AT THE END OF THIS FILE ALONG WITH OTHER HORIZONTAL TABLES

The community is also impacted through a heightened sense of solidarity. This "communitas" experience builds as all participants take hold of the cotton string passed around the congregation, and as each one reaches for the *phaakhwan* while they offer it to the recipient's *khwan*. It reaches its peak in the common call to the *khwan* to return. For a moment, hierarchy disappears. Together, the socially high and low come together and share their common human desire for well-being, which they believe can only be found in community.[56]

The Lao like to say that no matter what you have or do not have, to do a *khwan* ritual properly you must at least have the presence of the village community. The presence and participation of the village is seen in the person of the *mawphawn,* who is a former monk from the village temple, and in the congregation that is made up of family and neighbors. The *mawphawn* instructs the *khwan* and the recipient, on behalf of the community, regarding the recipient's social responsibilities.

As can be seen in Table 21, family members and neighbors play crucial roles from start to finish. They call for the *khwan* ritual to be done. They host the ritual performance. They prepare the *tonbaasii* and the offerings or gifts placed on it. They slaughter and prepare chicken meat offerings. They gather around the recipient and signal their support by holding the string along with the recipient. They mark the transitions in the chanting of the *mawphawn* with calls to the *khwan*, and they attach the recipient's *khwan* to her body with the cotton string and words of blessing. Consistent with this

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[56] True, on a theological level, the Lao believe that ultimate bliss is achieved in *nirvana* (oy[rko), but on a practical level, few feel they will ever reach this state. *Khwan* rituals represent an achievable state of well-being for villagers that is associated with this life.

observation, 61 percent of the respondents said that *khwan* rituals are about community solidarity. Another 46 percent said they are primarily about encouragement. Another 62 percent of the respondents (thirty-seven people) said that *khwan* rituals are important because they are traditional for Lao people (see Appendix B).

It is worth reviewing the structure of the community that supplies this emotional and physical strength to the recipient of the *khwan* ritual. First, every socially acceptable individual is identified with a household where females control residence patterns and family finances (see Potter 1977). As I have shown social relations in the household (and the village) are structured in terms of age/status, gender, and those with and without ritual knowledge. This setting promotes "acceptance of authority, interdependence, and cooperation" (Ruohomaki and Sparkes 2000:250).

Second, a village is defined primarily by the households that comprise it, and only secondarily by territory. These households are often related through female lines of descent, but males serve as formal authorities in the household and in the village.

Third, secular village life is carried out in opposition to sacred temple community life (Tambiah 1970). Village life is permeated by the presence and active participation of ancestral spirits, nature spirits, gods and goddesses, and one's own *khwan*. The temple does not refute the existence of these beings. Instead, it serves as a bastion of power for dealing with these realities, and as a source of knowledge that potentially leads past a life conditioned by them.

Fourth, village space is symbolically opposed to forest space, just as human domestic life is in opposition to the undomesticated life of animals and the spirits of the dead or *phii* (R. B. Davis 1984). It should be pointed out, however, that the ancestral

spirits of the spouse who owns the household property (normally the wife) are part of the household kinship system.

Fifth, village poverty and interdependence are symbolically opposed to *müang* power and wealth. *Müang* social relations, while not abandoning village structures, and never absent from the village themselves, are also structured based on wealth, education, and political power (Rouhomaki and Sparkes 2000:24).

Ritual Words

While the Lao emphasize the presence of the community in *khwan* rituals, it is also true that no *khwan* ritual happens without crafted ritual words. By "crafted," I mean words that follow a similar poetic pattern (£¿-¡ñ®-¡°-) but that also have a certain spontaneity to them (Somchit #1, 2001). Ritual words are crucial in all Lao rituals. The most powerful of these ritual words are the *Pali* texts chanted by the monks. The *mawphawn*'s most important qualification, even beyond having been a monk, is his ability to speak these words well and creatively so as to make them effective at each occasion (see Tambiah 1970:195-225).

Ritual Actions

Coupled with these words is action that manipulates physical elements to affect seen and unseen realities.[57] This is demonstrated in the concrete transfer of the *khwan* to the recipient with string and portions of food (the latter are transferred from the tray to

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[57] See Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou (1999) for a discussion on magic as the "control of this-worldly supernatural forces . . . by the use of proper chants, amulets, and automatically effective rituals."

the person's hand). It is also seen in the tossing of raw rice into the air in order to attract the *khwan* to the house.

There might be a tendency to regard the ritual words, and especially the actions in *khwan* rituals as magic. There certainly is evidence that similarity and contagion are put to use.[58] Personal effects of the recipient are placed on the *phaakhwan* because they are believed to have aspects of a person's *khwan* in them. These items are placed on the funeral pyre and burned with the corpse in order to be sure that these elements do not haunt the living. As has been shown, cotton string is used to demonstrate the interconnectedness between the community and the recipient, and between the seen and the unseen. But this so-called magical element in *khwan* rituals would not be effective without the moral power of the household and the village kin who are present. For this reason it is better not to label these words and actions "magic." They have no power in and of themselves (see Kraft 1995:95-100).

Khwan Ritual Occasions

Tables 22A, 22B, and 22C list *khwan* rituals that were frequently cited by the Lao in the questionnaire. The column on the far left side indicates how these rituals divide into the emic categories of blessing and restoration.[59] The second column from the left shows etic categories that divide the emic categories into five. Blessing *khwan* rituals are subdivided into *baasii* rituals, (which focus on honoring), threshold rituals, (which focus on strengthening for a new venture), and rites of passage (or in some cases reintegration

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[58] For discussions on the role of contagion and similarity in magic see Hierbert, Shaw, and Tiénou (1999:69ff), and Kraft (1995:100ff).

[59] I am borrowing this term from Zago (1972:129-170).

TABLE 22A

KHWAN RITUAL OCCASIONS

Emic	Etic	Name of *Suukhwan* Ritual	Performed For	Occasion	Purpose
Blessing Rituals	*Baasii* Rituals	*Suukhwan* for monk -(®¾-¦-ó-²½-¦Ö¤)	Local temple monk, usually the abbot	New Year	Strengthen and bless the monk for his role in helping villagers to make merit.
		New Year *Suukhwan* (®¾-¦ó¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--¯ó-ÃÏÈ)	Elders, monks, community leaders	Lao New Year, 5th lunar month (April)	Strengthen, bless, and honor leaders in the community
		Baasii for a VIP (®¾-¦óÁ¢¡-¦ñ´-£ñ--´¾-µ¾´)	Important guest/outsider	When he or she shows up; any time will do	Bless, honor, and integrate the guest into the community.
		Ordinary honorary *Suukhwan* (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--ê¿-¾-©¾)	Focus is on the elderly in the household but then for the whole household	New Year or any auspicious time	Increase the morale of the person further by honoring, him or her before his or her family and friends.
		House blessing *Suukhwan* (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--°¸¨-²°--À»õ°-)	For a household	Whenever the family has enough resources to feast their neighbors and feels the need for additional blessing	Protect the household's good fortune.
	Khwan Threshold Rituals	New house *Suukhwan* (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--À»õ°-)	Family who built the new house and the house itself	After a new house has been erected by a family in the community	Bless the new house and its owners. Call the *khwan* to the center post of the house.
		Start of new business venture (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--À»ñ©-ê÷-ì½-¡Ò©-ÃÏÈ)	For a business person	At the start of a new business venture	Bless the person and strengthen their efforts in business.
		Suukhwan for relative going abroad (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--¦‰¤-²†--É°¤-Ä¯-ªÈ¾¤-¨½-Àê©)	Usually students who will study abroad	Before departure	Strengthen the *khwan*; instruct it not to wander and get lost in the new place.
		Suukhwan for a soldier (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--ê½-¹¾-)	Soldier	Before he leaves the village on duty	Strengthen his *khwan* and instruct it not to be frightened and flee from the duties of a soldier.

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TABLE 22B

KHWAN RITUAL OCCASIONS

Emic	Etic	Name of *Suukhwan* Ritual	Performed For	Occasion	Purpose
Blessing Rituals	*Khwan* Rites of Passage/Reintegration	Small wedding *Suukhwan* (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ---É°¨-Ã--¤¾--ÁªÈ¤©º¤)	Engaged husband and wife-to-be	After the bride price has been settled	Cement agreement. Prepare everyone for implications of marriage.
		Great wedding *Suukhwan* (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--ÁªÈ¤©º¤)	New husband and wife	Auspicious day (not during Lent)	Unite the *khwan* of bride and groom.
		Suukhwan Naak (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--¾¡)	A (usually young) man who is to be ordained for a period of time	Just before ordination as a monk	Strength against anxiety of leaving his sexuality, family, and friends for a time.
		Suukhwan for a pregnant woman (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--Á´È´°-)	A woman who is pregnant, especially if it is her first time	This is held early in the pregnancy and then some time again later in the pregnancy	Strengthen the pregnant woman who may be afraid of the effects of the pregnancy (e.g., pain, death).
		Suukhwan for a relative who has returned after a long trip (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--ªº--»ñ®-²†--É°¤-°øÉ-¡ñ-®-´¾)	Returned relative	After a long trip away from the village	Recall the *khwan* that may have stayed behind in the place the relatives(s) traveled to.
Restoration Rituals	**Healing Rituals**	*Suukhwan* mother and newborn (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--ºº¡-¡ñ´)	Mother and newborn	When period of time on the fire bed ends (15-30 days after birth)	Recall *khwan* of child that the ancestors may be withholding. Ends period of uncleanness of mother (issue of blood).
		Suukhwan for ill or injured person (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--°øÉ-À¥ñ®)	A person who is ill, injured, depressed	During the illness or while still injured.	Recall the *khwan*. Encouragement and morale for the ill (physical/ emotional).
		Suukhwan after person recovers from illness or injury (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--°øÉ-¹¾¨-²½-¾©-ÁìÉ¸)	A person who has recovered from an illness, accident, sorrow (depression) or fear	After recovery to fulfill the promise of a feast to an ancestor spirit should the person recover	Feast the ancestor spirits who caused illness. Recall the *khwan*. Encouragement and morale for the recovered person.

Emic	Etic	Name of *Suukhwan* Ritual	Performed For	Occasion	Purpose
Restoration Rituals	**Healing Rituals (continued)**	Great *Suukhwan* (¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--Í¸¤)	Person who is near death from illness	The very ill, especially the elderly who the shaman says will die	Recall the *khwan*. Encouragement and morale for healing from illness. Held on three consecutive evenings.
		Great *Suukhwan* (2) (¦ø-¢¸ñ--Í¸¤)	For the whole village	When several things happen indicating that there is bad luck in the village	Recall the *khwan*. To rid the village of bad luck and renew the *khwan* and thus the blessing.
		Call the *Khwan* (»¼¡-¢¸ñ-)	For an ill or injured person	When the elders or shaman diagnose that the illness is caused by the loss of *khwan* in a particular place	Capture the person's *khwan* in the place it was lost, bring it back, and reattach it to the person in order to restore his or her health.

rituals).[60] All *khwan* blessing rituals, but *baasii* rituals in particular, draw power from the foundational myths that explain the world and establish the legitimacy of the ruling *müang* powers.[61] Restoration *khwan* rituals are sub-divided into healing rituals and livelihood rituals. Restoration rituals draw power from the tension between the opposition of forest and village. In them, the undomesticated strength of forest animals and ancestors (*phii*) is combined with the moral strength of the household.

Two important themes emerge from this analysis. First, *khwan* rituals cover nearly every aspect of life. In fact, the very reason that there is no definite list of

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[60] Comparing my categories of *khwan* rituals with the Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou categories (1999:303), I understand *baasii* and threshold rituals to be intensification rituals, *khwan* rites of passage as transformation rituals, healing *khwan* rituals as crisis rituals, and livelihood rituals as a special kind of crisis ritual.

[61] The connection between *khwan* rituals and Lao cosmology can be seen in the ceremony of the guardian spirit of Vientiane, which ends with a *suukhwan* in honor of *Chanta Buulom*, the founding ancestor king of the Lao (Archaimbault 1964:67), and in the references to *suukhwan* in the *Phra Lak Phra Lam*, where these rituals are a key part of fulfilling moral-social duty (see Sahai 1996:82, 89, and 99).

occasions or kinds of *khwan* rituals is because *khwan* rituals may be applied to any situation in life that demands them. What exactly demands them? A loss of strength--be it physical, emotional, or spiritual--for dealing with the uncertainties of life. The second theme emerges from the first. Namely, all *khwan* rituals are about this life; not the next one to come (and especially, not death). This is in stark contrast to the concern for the dead in Lao Buddhism.

TABLE 22C

***KHWAN* RITUAL OCCASIONS**

Emic	Etic	Name of *Khwan* Ritual	Performed For	Occasion	Purpose
Restoration Rituals	**Livelihood *Khwan* Rituals**	*Suukhwan* for rice ¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--À¢í¾	For the *khwan* of the Rice Spirit	Any time throughout the rice season, but especially at harvest when the rice is beaten/ threshed	Ask forgiveness of the rice for beating it and to strengthen and encourage it to give a good harvest.
		Suukhwan for animals that assist humans in providing a means of living ¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--£¸¾¨ §É¾¤ ´É¾ ¤ö¸ ´Éº-	For domesticated animals that work for the welfare of humans; such as water-buffalo, elephants, horses, oxen and silk worms	Example: water buffalo, after it has plowed the fields and been mistreated by such heavy labor	Ask forgiveness, strengthen and encourage the animals for the work they do for humans. They have been treated harshly and must be feasted.
		Suukhwan for a wagon ¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--¡¸-	The wagon used primarily for hauling straw, hay, and the harvest from the fields. The wagon is pulled by water buffalo or oxen.	After the harvest	Increase the strength of the wagon; protect it from mishap.
		Suukhwan for a vehicle ¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--ìö©	For a motorbike, car, pickup truck	When it is purchased as a means of earning a living (e.g., taxi)	To strengthen the *khwan* of a vehicle or unite it with its *khwan*. To ensure its dependability.

There is a crucial point of connection between these two orientations, and it is felt even within *khwan* rituals themselves. On one polar end, *baasii* rituals speak most clearly to health, well-being, and life, while on the other pole *hiakkhwan* rituals speak most clearly to the fear of death. The central purpose of *khwan* rituals is to enable the individual to successfully meet the challenges of life. The primary means of doing this is through the encouragement of the community, and through powerful ritual words and actions.

It might also be argued that the tension between both these two poles reflects the tension between life and death itself, since *baasii* rituals are not only for blessing but also for fortification against the evil that could occur. Likewise, *hiakkhwan* rituals are focused on preserving life against death. It is well known that when all of a person's *khwan* leave them they die. This is most clearly in focus during *suukhwan luang* rituals for the elderly who are dying (QR #35). On the other hand, *khwan* rituals are not done for the dead. The state of the dead must be dealt with through Buddhist rituals and sometimes through rituals done by the shaman (*mawyao*). The presence of *khwan* means life and life abundantly, it gives the Lao *khwaamsuk* (well-being), its absence brings the threat of death.

Khwan Rituals in the Lao Religious System

One of the on-going anthropological mysteries is how the religious ritual systems of Buddhism, Brahmanism, and Animism work together.[62] As has already been pointed

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[62] See Terwiel's discussion on Thailand (1994:1-18), Tambiah's discussion on the Lao of northeast Thailand (1970:337ff), Mulder (1979), and Zago's discussion for Laos (1972:337ff).

out more than once, the Lao hold the various religious ritual systems together, while generally being aware of the traditions from which each ritual has come. Calling yourself a Buddhist in Laos does not usually mean that you have given up the more ancient religious allegiances to Brahman deities and ancestor spirits.[63] It is important, then, to consider the relationship between these religious systems as sources of power and morality.

<u>Overlapping Ritual Areas</u>

While Tambiah's categories of Buddhist, *Khwan*, Guardian, and Malevolent Spirit ritual systems for the Lao in northeast Thailand are helpful, they can tend to hide the extent to which Buddhist power, ancestor spirits, guardian spirits (such as Brahman gods and goddesses), and *khwan* occupy the same ritual space. Although Tambiah acknowledges this reality, the etic perspective of four distinct ritual systems can fail to bring to light the role ancestor spirits can play in Buddhist and *khwan* rituals, and the role of Buddhism in *khwan* blessing rituals. As R. B. Davis argues, even ritual experts cannot be classified "as followers of distinct ritual subsystems, each with its own following of devotees; there are no cults which propitiate powers that derive from exclusively Buddhist, 'Brahmanical,' archaic *Tai*, or aboriginal traditions" (1984:78).

Tables 23A and 23B attempt to depict the interplay of Lao ritual systems. The depiction is not exhaustive, but it does show a more diachronic view of *khwan* rituals within the larger Lao ritual system. The community assists in empowering *khwan* rituals

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[63] It should be noted, however, that there were at least two attempts in Lao history to rid the Lao culture of the *phii* cult. King Pothisarath passed an edict in 1527 to prohibit it (Condominas 1987:452), and the Lao PRP published a number of school books denouncing superstitious beliefs.

TABLE 23A APPEARS AT THE END OF THIS FILE ALONG WITH OTHER HORIZONTAL TABLES

TABLE 23B APPEARS AT THE END OF THIS FILE ALONG WITH OTHER HORIZONTAL TABLES

to be sure that each individual is fully integrated and able to fulfill his or her role. This community is primarily defined in terms of female kinship ties between households. Of course, this occasionally extends into the level of village-nation community (e.g., for the female rice goddess and to honor a male monk).

The centrality of the household emerges clearly from the religious system as a whole. The household is the unit of participation in daily giving to the temple. At each Buddhist ritual, a person from each household is expected to participate on behalf of all the others.[64] The person who does this 86 percent of the time in Vientiane Municipality is the wife-mother (Institute for Cultural Research 1999:58). The husbands and sons from each household will spend time in the temple and be cared for through gifts made by female household members (producing merit for ancestors and the parents of the household).[65] *Khwan* rituals are almost all held in and hosted by the household.[66] Offerings to the rice goddess (*Phii Taahääk*) and the earth goddess *Naang Tawranii* are made by the household to bless the harvest, and for protection when traveling.

Power in Lao Religious Ritual

The centrality of the household and its ritual relationship with the various sources of power is crucial to grasp. As was shown in Chapter 5, Mulder argues that the Thai locate "the reliable order of morality and goodness" in the Buddhist temple community, "the home, the mother, and the female symbols of Mother Earth and Mother Rice." In

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[64] This is also true of political meetings and community work projects.

[65] Merit is transferred on each occasion by the ritual of *yaad nam* or pouring sacred water from a small pitcher into the earth near a place believed to be the residence of the ancestor spirits. As the water is poured, the person's left hand is held upright in the praying position and a prayer of blessing is spoken.

[66] The only exceptions to this would be *baasii* rituals hosted by government officials in government buildings. But in my experience the official will even often hold this type in his own home.

opposition to this order of morality is the realm of power that he breaks down into the sub-categories of *saksit* power and chaos (or evil power). He comments as follows on this structure, "Power is the most spectacular, interesting and central manifestation of Thai life; its cognitive elaboration and the way power is lived-with reveal the essentially animistic substratum of the Thai mentality" (1979:113).

Table 24 reworks Mulder's argument for two kinds of moral goodness and two kinds of power in Thai culture for the Lao situation (see Mulder's original on Table 13) in terms of what I simply call moral, amoral, and immoral power.[67] These three kinds of power are located in the Buddhist realm of dispassionate transcendence of life, domestic human life, and the realm of chaos associated with the forest and epitomized in death.

Mulder's basic point (which I believe is correct) is that the Thai (and the Lao) often avail themselves of the amoral power of spiritual beings. While they have at their disposal the use of moral power derived from kinship obligations, necessity requires access to the effective force of spiritual beings with amoral power. It is important to understand that both fathers (as leaders and monks) and mothers normally use moral and amoral power in religious ritual to deal with life circumstances.

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[67] Mulder uses the word *saksit* to refer to "the tenuous order outside the home. It is the area of most intensive religious preoccupation, of loss and gain, danger and protection, and has very clear mechanical rules for dealing with it" (1979:112). The problem with this definition is that the Lao generally understand *saksit* power to be good (©ó-Àìó©) (*Awnmaniisawn* 1992:262, cf. Kerr 1972:403). Mulder's definition tends to over-emphasize the dangerous aspects of s*aksit* power. If Mulder is using this word in a technical sense there is no problem, but in Lao *saksit* refers to what is sacred. Examples of spiritual entities that are considered *saksit* are Buddha images, the monks who empower amulets and places with auspicious spiritual power (e.g., a mountain or river), the Pali text, Hindu deities (especially *Indra, Brahma*, and *Vishnu*), angels (Àê¸½-©¾) *thāāvadaa*, guardian spirits, nature spirits, the rice goddess, the earth goddess and even *khwan*.

As shown in Table 24, at the level of the village, the moral power of fathers is primarily in focus, but mothers remain in view since monks are said to make merit on behalf of their mothers. At the level of the household, the moral power of mothers is primarily in focus, but fathers remain in view because men are the formal heads of the

TABLE 24

MORALITY AND POWER IN LAO SOCIETY

Level of Existence	Undomesticated Dispassionate Non-Existence	Human Domestic Life			The Dead
Social Level	Temple	Household (kinship)	Village (government and temple)	*Müang* Power	The misfortunate
Social Focus	Buddha	**Mothers** (fathers)	**Fathers** (mothers)	**Powerful Politicians Wealthy People**	**The dead,** forest, rivers
Source of Spiritual Moral Power	*Dharma* Wisdom	Selfless care of others as **mothers** birthing and raising children *Khwan* Female, ancestor spirits, rice goddess, earth goddess	Self-denial of men as **leaders** who care for the community and as **monks** who teach others and give others opportunities to make merit *Khwan*	**Buddha Dharma Monks**	Virtue (*Bunkhun*) of **ancestors,** especially grandmother
Source of Spiritual Amoral Power	None	Nature and guardian spirits	Nature and guardian spirits	Monks, *Pali* texts, Buddha images, Hindu deities, angels, nature spirits, ancestral spirits who have become guardian spirits	Fear that ancestors will be offended
Source of Aggressive Immoral Power	None	Fear of offended, evil spirits	Fear of offended, evil spirits	Fear of offended, evil spirits	Anger of offended, evil spirits
Basis of Relation-ships	None	Promise between kin	Promise between kin and power of leadership roles	Contractual	Fear

household. Buddhist rituals performed by monks representing the village, and *khwan* rituals performed in the household, both call on the amoral *müang* spiritual power for assistance. For example, *khwan* rituals draw on the moral power of the monk through his denial of secular life on behalf of the community. They also draw on the moral power of mothers by being performed in the household that she and her maternal ancestry own. At the same time, the amoral force of the *Pali* chants, the invoked presence of Brahman deities, angels, and guardian spirits are called on to empower the rituals.

The spirits said to exist at the household level are *khwan*, the ancestral spirits of the spouse who owns the home, the rice goddess, and the earth goddess. Dealing with them requires that the moral obligations in kinship ties be fulfilled. In *khwan* rituals this means affirming the community's love, respect, and promise to care for the person whose *khwan* is called. In dealing with ancestral spirits and the goddesses, the same things are communicated.

The matrilocal pattern of Lao society which forces men to leave home, coupled with the pattern of male dominance of formal leadership roles, work together to put men in contact with *müang* power outside the village much more frequently than women. That men can be seen to use amoral power more often is reflected in the fact that normally male ancestral spirits are housed outside the family house (Somchit #8, 2001 and Wechkama 2001). It can also be seen in that the village guardian spirit is normally thought to be male (Somchit #8, 2001).[68]

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[68] The guardian spirit is usually not only male but is thought to also have an appetite for human life unless appeased. This is reflected in the story of *Thao Dääng Awn* and the Giant *Yak.*

Household relationships governed by mothers are based on the promise of care and support within kinship relationships structured along female lines of descent. Women do resource amoral power, but they normally do so in pursuit of the well-being of the members of the household. Relationships at the village level that are male in focus couple the promise of care with the utilitarian use of power in leadership roles. Male power at the village level is on loan from the *müang*. Local leaders are empowered, not only by the consensus of the household kin, but also by the stamp of approval of *müang* political powers. As a result, the moral power of the household (women) is more reliable. Amoral force (as Mulder indicates) is a power that is located outside of household social experience. It is associated more often with men, is located at the *müang* level of social experience, and is also associated with the forest. All three of these lack biological kinship ties with the women of the household.

The morality of the household does not exist in a vacuum. It exists within the scope of larger *müang* powers where relationships carry obligation without promise. *Müang* powers demand respect and payment, and they relate to people out of sheer force. Political and business *müang* powers are enabled and legitimized by spiritual *müang* powers. If relationships with these powers are managed well with the right ritual offerings, they can be used for the good of the household and village. If they are not managed well, they can be very dangerous and unpredictable. Dealing with amoral *müang* powers carries potential for good, but without guarantee.[69]

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[69] Tambiah observes that the ritual gifts given to the Buddha image, angels and Hindu deities are called *khüangbuusaa* (À£ˆº¤-®ø-§¾) while offerings to the ancestral spirits are called *liangphii* (ìÉ¼¤-°ó)

The column to the far right in Table 24 conveys the realm of immoral power. It reflects the fact that both men and women may periodically face crises that touch their lives as chaos and the threat of death.[70] In these cases humans are forced to deal directly with evil spirits with the help of ritual experts. Depending on their reputation, either the local monk or the local shaman will be called to assist in this battle with immoral power. These rituals are not spoken of very often and are dealt with as privately as possible at the household level. No one advertises his or her misfortune unless it is necessary to do so.

The Lao religious ritual system is oriented towards life that has been domesticated to a large extent, but there are two polar ends at which community fades from view. The ultimate moral achievement is the rejection of the attachment to life (and thus community to some extent) by means of knowledge and the wise practice of the *Dhamma*. This is an individualistic and primarily male pursuit for the state of the Buddha. On the other end is the ultimate experience of chaos and immorality associated with evil spirits and death. Here individuals do not choose to leave the community, but are isolated by their misfortune. Everything in-between is associated with the struggle to live well in the

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(1970:341). He suggests that the first is a kind of gift given out of respect and in the knowledge that it is not needed nor partaken of by the deity. The second term, however, indicates an offering that the spirit needs and does partake of. Caring for an ancestral spirit or a spirit with which there is a personal relationship indicates that the person feels a sense of moral obligation to care for the spirit's needs. But the Lao can seek power to meet their needs using either method and use the terms interchangeably (Somchit #8, 2002). The term *baphii* and *kääba* refer to the making of a contract with a spirit or deity and the payment of the contract obligation respectively after the spirit has granted the request of the person who made the contract. These terms need more analysis before conclusions can be drawn.

[70] For example, the death of a young person in the household whose spirit is now haunting them or a string of bad luck may require appeal for help from either the shaman (*maw yao*) or the local monk.

community. At the heart of this struggle, people have available to assist them the moral power of fathers and mothers, and the ritually obtained amoral force of *müang* powers.[71]

The patterns for obtaining spiritual power to live well are mirrored in the strategies for obtaining social power. In society, male teachers and mothers are often known for providing services for others without thought of repayment. This moral quality is a significant source of the social respect they are given. At the same time, some government officials and female merchants are known as people who can become powerful allies for negotiating the circumstances of life. They are not morally-oriented relationships, but they are useful in dealing with the challenges of life. Alliances with powerful people are dependent upon gifts that establish social contracts. But one can never be sure how long an alliance will last before a more advantageous alliance comes along. There are segments of Lao society (as in all societies) that are completely anti-social and bent on evil. In extreme cases it is said that they are possessed by evil spirits. Ritual specialists can drive the spirits away or the person may be driven out of the community.

Thick Description of *Khwan* Rituals

The theory of thick description, developed by Geertz, is one that seeks to interpret social phenomena by examining multiple levels of meaning. The thick description I offer below fits into Riceour's idea of understanding as appropriation. Below I consider the

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[71] The tension between male and female moral powers can be seen in the nothern Thailand myth that says that the Buddha himself paid respect to the rice goddess when she came to see him. Other versions of this story convey the superiority of the Buddha and others leave the tension unresolved (Ruohomaki and Sparkes 2000).

meaning of *khwan* rituals from four different levels, in a sort of archeological survey of the multi-vocal meaning of *khwan* in Lao society.

Khwan is Our Happiness

One of the problems in defining *khwan* comes from the fact that it can really only be defined in terms of its presence within or absence from, the human body. *Khwan* is intimately connected with the physical human body. It is for this reason that I wish to argue that *khwan* is life. It is what makes a body a living human being. A Christian might call it "the breath of God." But since it exists in opposition to *vinnyaan*, *khwan* might be more properly thought of as a Lao person's "life-spirit." *Vinnyaan*, I suggest, should be understood as a person's "after-life-spirit."[72] *Vinnyaan* will be reincarnated again, depending on one's *karma*, so it is not death as an ultimate state but as a stage in a process. *Phii*, from a Buddhist perspective, is a *vinnyaan* that has not yet let go of the attachments to life, and so continues the cycle of existence. The influence of *phii* on a community is related to the strength and quality of the community's memory of the dead.

The presence of *khwan* in one's body is a sign of well-being, and well-being assumes life in the context of relationships in the household, village, and *müang*. *Khwan* is said to be frequently tempted to wander or flee from the body. It wanders when it considers life to be too chaotic. Chaos is experienced as either physical (in the form of accident or illness) or social discomfort (in the form of an offense from others or in the retaliation of an offended ancestor). When *khwan* is well, it is in the village fulfilling its

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[72] This agrees with Tambiah (1970:338).

social duties and enjoying the love and respect of others, as well as physical health. *Khwan* rituals are a means of drawing on the moral and *saksit* power of the community to honor and strengthen individuals against the threat of misfortune, for the sake of the individual and also that of the household-village community.

Khwan Blessing Rituals

At a deep level, *khwan* rituals have two poles between which their meaning dialectically resonates. One pole celebrates blessing, and the other fights off the threat of misfortune and death. To deal with this dialectic I have categorized *khwan* rituals into blessing and restoration rituals. At an emic level these distinctions are recognized by some, but not by all. But the etic analysis above points to polar sides of the meaning of *khwan* rituals, even if some *khwan* rituals touch on both meanings.[73]

In *khwan* rituals that focus on blessing, a person's present state of well-being is celebrated. This is done to honor the person since *karma* teaches that blessing comes with merit, and merit comes with ritually moral actions. But it is also done to protect and strengthen the individual. Life is vulnerable and blessing is even more vulnerable, subject to the whims of nature, illness, accident, and the jealousy of the living and the dead (*phii*). New ventures such as marriage, study abroad, business, motherhood, and so on, bring new challenges that will require additional fortitude if one is to live well.

Figure 12 shows that blessing the *khwan* is to be done by drawing on two sources of power: female household moral power, and male Buddhist moral and amoral power.

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[73] This can be seen clearly in *suukhwan* rituals for elders. While they are being celebrated there is an unspoken concern for strengthening the *khwan* of the elder, since he or she is approaching death.

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Female power is derived from the self-denial involved in giving birth and nurturing children. The power of this moral act can be seen visibly in the gathered household of

| Power for a Blessed Life |

Blessing Khwan Rituals

Mothers and Household Kinship

Moral *Saksit* power of motherhood

- Birthing / Nurturing Children
- Rice
- Earth

Domestic life with kin

- Buddhist temple community
- Kin community of the living and the dead (ancestors)

Monks, Brahman Gods, Angels, *Singsaksit*

Moral power of the monk

Amoral power of *Pali* chants and Buddhist symbols

- White cotton string
- African marigolds
- Structure of *Tonbaasii*

Amoral power of the presence of Hindu deities, guardian spirits, and angels

FIGURE 12

POWER IN *KHWAN* BLESSING RITUALS

female related kin at the ritual. The household and rice are associated with motherhood, the rice goddess, and the earth goddess. Male moral power is derived from the presence of the *mawphawn*, who is a former monk and a father. The male amoral power is made

audible in the chanting of sacred *Pali* words, seen in the Buddhist symbols of white cotton string, African marigolds, and the hierarchical structure of the *tonbaasii*. The amoral power of the Hindu pantheon, angels, and everything with *saksit* power in the universe is invoked to bless the ritual.

Khwan Restoration Rituals

In *khwan* restoration rituals, the goal is to reestablish blessing in the person's life by seeking reconciliation with the community, nature, and domestic ancestor spirits, by offering gifts and recalling the *khwan*. The gifts are offered to the household ancestor spirits, now associated with the forest/nature through death. In some cases, restoration *khwan* rituals are done to compensate the rice, buffalo, and cattle. These three and the ancestors all have *khun* (the virtue of selfless giving) towards people in the village. Reconciliation brings health and good luck to the community and the rice harvest.

Restoration in relationships is effected by ritually taping into the moral power of the household and of Buddhism. But in this case, the moral power of mothers is extended in scope to the dead female ancestor spirits. This is shown in the left-hand circle in Figure 13. The focus of restoration in *khwan* rituals is normally indicated by the presence of meat on the *phaakhwan*.

The power of mothers is derived from their association with life and nature. The moral power of female ancestors is derived from having been mothers in the same household, from their age, and from their association with nature through death. The *phii* are empowered by the fear of death and illness among the living, and the sense of obligation to feed (*liang phii*) the dead ancestors food offerings. The household

domesticates the power of offended ancestors by offering payment for the offense with meat offerings on the *phaakhwan*, and by acknowledging their obligation to remember and respect the deceased ancestors. The domestication of the power of the ancestors
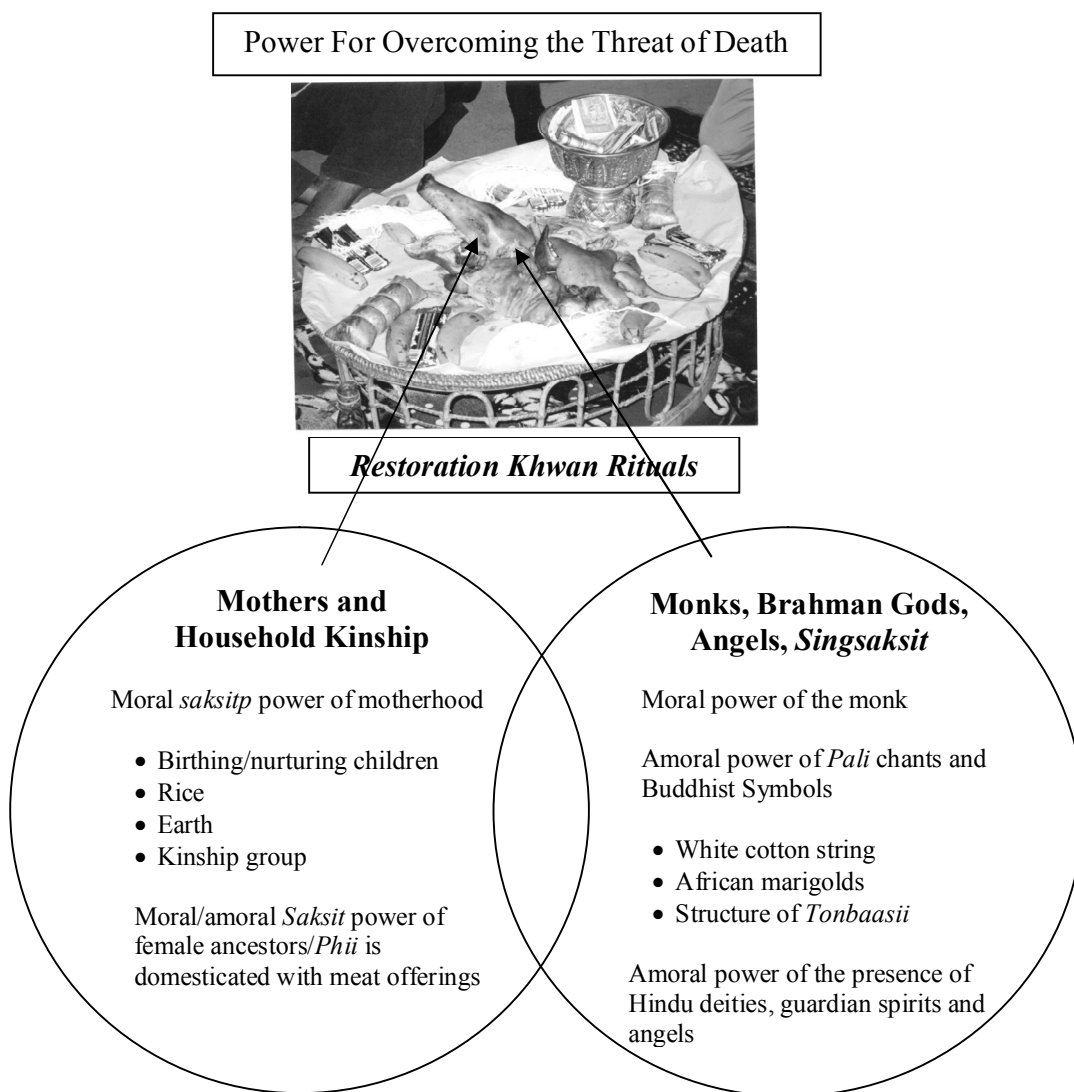
FIGURE 13

POWER IN RESTORATIVE *KHWAN* RITUALS

makes the performance of *khwan* rituals effective in restoring health and blessing. This domestication of the power of ancestral spirits runs parallel to the domestication of rice, buffalo, and cattle, which are also things of nature that have been domesticated for use in the household and village.

When the goal in a *khwan* ritual is blessing and honor, then the *phaakhwan* ritual objects tend to reflect Buddhism, hierarchy, and the aspiration of the Lao to be *müang* leaders. This aspiration is understandable when one realizes that blessing traditionally reached its symbolic zenith in royalty, just as blessing is mythically portrayed in the *Ramayana* character *Rama*.[74]

When the goal of *khwan* rituals is restoration or healing, then the *phaakhwan* reflect the symbolic opposition between household-village and the forest (the undomesticated dwelling place of the *phii*). In this context, cotton string and rice cultivation speak to what it means to be a human in the village, in that only humans wear clothing and farm rice. This contrasts human social life in the village with wild undomesticated life in the forest and the chaos of death. It does not negate, however, the obligation of humans to the *phii* who are dependent upon the living for the provision of clothing and food (offerings), in their state as spirits. Humans in the village likewise depend upon the *phii* for protection, blessing, enforcing social norms, and advice in times of crisis.[75]

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[74] As was mentioned earlier, this aspiration becomes clearest in the wedding *khwan* ritual, *suukhwan dong*, where the bride and groom dress themselves to look like *Rama* and his bride *Siidaa*.

[75] Advice from the *phii* is sought through local female mediums (there are also male mediums, but they usually serve the guardian spirit of the area) who are known as *Nang Tiam* (-¾¤-ê¼´).

Khwan Rituals in the 21st Century

Zago correctly suggests that Buddhism has not impacted the meaning of Lao *khwan* rituals the way it has in Thailand, but the rituals have been influenced by the empirical assumptions of Marxism, capitalism, and globalization. An increasing number of Lao understand *khwan* to be a symbol of human emotions, rather than a spiritual entity (see Appendix B). According to Evans, the secular role of *khwan* rituals has been increasing since 1980. This shift may gradually result in an increase in the performance of *khwan* blessing rituals as the focus moves from community solidarity to a means of affirming the prestige of individuals (Evans 1998:81). By extension, this shift in focus also reflects an increasing pursuit of achieving the status of a *müang* leader.

Khwan rituals have also been impacted by the extension of *müang* power into the villages through increased centralization, made possible by roads and communication systems. This centralization has increased the ability of the Lao government to influence and control a larger sphere of community life. The trend can only continue. The LPRP has clearly tried to associate itself with the moral power of Buddhism and household *khwan* rituals as means of achieving legitimacy for their status as *müang* rulers (Evans 1998:80-81). Now instead of preserving the well-being of the individuals in the household, *khwan* rituals may increasingly be used to display and legitimize the accumulation of wealth and political power.

In this secular environment competition is increasing, and so is the use of amoral *saksit* power to achieve the "blessings." The value placed on self-denial for others symbolized in the monk and in motherhood is giving way to the value of getting ahead of others and accumulating power for power's sake. Moral *saksit* power is increasingly

being put aside for amoral *saksit* power. Contracts for mutual profit are becoming more numerous than are promises to provide for kin. As the role of the household and village in assisting individuals to face life declines, the mechanisms for protecting the personal dignity of vulnerable individuals who make up the majority of the Lao may decline too. Already the new accumulation of wealth is very lopsided and favors those who already have a head start in the areas of education, wealth, and political power.

Khwan rituals are increasingly being called on to celebrate the accumulation of power. The situation raises the question, "Will the poor majority be content to celebrate the blessing of the moral strength found in the household and its extended kinship community, or will blessing be completely redefined in terms of amoral accumulation of *müang* power?" The answer will come out of the choices made by Lao people in their social relationships. The balancing of the obligations to kin with the expediency of non-kin power relationships in education, business, and politics will become more difficult with the increasing impact of globalization.

Summary

Khwan rituals may reflect both the worldview and the structure of Lao social relations, more than any other type of Lao rituals. Part II has served to interpret the meaning of *khwan* rituals as the pursuit for well-being in life in the context of social obligations in the household, the village, and the *müang*. The discussion now leads into Chapter 6 regarding what *khwan* rituals reflect about the worldview of the lowland Lao, and the way inwhich they empower social relations. While Rappaport was shown to

argue for the connection be ritual and social relationships, it can be demonstrated most clearly using Douglas' grid and group theory.

PART III

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of my research are presented in this final part of the dissertation. Chapter 6 describes lowland Lao worldview themes by tying them to the structure of Lao social relations. Chapter 7 considers how Lao worldview themes might impact and be impacted by reading two biblical narratives that relate directly to issues of Lao social structure. The purpose of this dissertation is accomplished in Chapter 8. There I use the Lao worldview themes and Lao social structure already described to shape communication strategies for Christian witness among the lowland Lao in the Lao PDR.

CHAPTER 6

LAO WORLDVIEW THEMES IN *KHWAN* RITUALS

Catherine Bell has written that, "the fundamental efficacy of ritual activity lies in its ability to have people embody assumptions about their place in a larger order of things" (1997:xi). For Douglas "the cosmology" that people embody are assumptions about the boundaries and internal organization of a society. "Rituals are for social interaction" (1970:150). This statement reflects Douglas' fundamental belief that rituals are descriptions of the social body. Along with Geertz and Rappaport, she believes that religious ritual reflects the cosmology of a society. First, cosmology is reflected in the way a society defines and preserves its boundaries (group). These boundaries are symbolized the way the group deals with the boundaries of their physical bodies. Second, a society's cosmology is reflected in the internal controls they place on one another's behavior (grid).

My study of *khwan* rituals revealed a wide variety of important cultural worldview assumptions and images. While there is a great deal of cognitive information involved in being Lao, the most important thing about the meaning of *khwan* ritual symbols for shaping a communication of the gospel to Lao people is what the ritual says about the Lao way of relating socially. Accordingly, the Lao worldview is oriented toward power, since power is the foundational issue of organizing social relationships. In the Lao context the experience of power (or the lack of it), is concerned with

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relationships at two levels. First, Lao worldview is concerned with the relationships within the maternal kinship networks of the household and village. Second, the Lao worldview is shaped to manage the powers that are beyond the scope of control of the maternal social network. These powers, I have collectively referred to as *müang* powers, which are the cosmic beings that control nature (e.g., rainfall for the rice) and the larger social complexes that control the macro political and economic contexts.

In the present chapter, my purpose is to present Lao worldview themes using etic categories. I use etic categories as a means of translating emic concerns so that outsiders--and I am included--can better comprehend the Lao world. These etic categories are shaped, however, by the emic concern for social relationships. Each category relates humans to other human relationships or to the cosmos itself.

The worldview categories are taken from Douglas (1970), Kraft (1997), and Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis, and Aaron Wildavsky (1990). From Douglas I take the categories of grid and group. I see these categories to be roughly equivalent to Kraft's categories of person-group and relationships.[1] I have also combined Kraft's categories of time, space, and causality under the term "cosmos," a term I borrowed from M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky. Then I use M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky's categories of human nature, meeting human needs, and preferences. Whenever possible

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[1] Kraft's worldview universals are classification, person-group, time, space, causality, and relationships (1996:63-65). These are similar to Kearney's (1984), but Kraft defines them in more relational ways than those of Kearney's more cognitive approach. M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky's categories developed for the four cosmologies in Douglas' grid-group model are the structure of nature, making ends meet, preferences, and social change (1990:25-82). I will deal with change separately in the latter part of this chapter.

the worldview image (or root metaphor) associated with the category will be identified and discussed.

Grid and Group in *Khwan* Rituals

Rituals establish the power and order needed for social relationships, through the narrative "Word" they establish (Rappaport 1999). Douglas, following Durkheim, suggests that religion derives this power from the degree to which the group influences the individual behavior of its members, and from the order it uses to regulate interpersonal relationships in the group. Below, I discuss grid and group dynamics in *khwan* rituals by first looking at the group dynamics.

Group in *Khwan* Rituals

Khwan rituals are an intensely group-oriented event, performed on behalf of an individual who has a need to celebrate his or her good fortune or reverse his or her bad fortune. Beyond the presence of the ritual specialist and ritual objects, the essential ingredient for performing *khwan* rituals is the community of kin. It is the community that empowers the individual's *khwan* with the moral strength required to live well. Living well always implies living up to the obligations of kinship ties (this will be expanded upon below, when I discuss grid). Integration into the community is such a deep concern that nearly all foreign guests are made the recipients of a *khwan* ritual before they leave Laos. Evans agrees with Zago's suggestion that the performance of *khwan* rituals for strangers is at one level a form of protection for the community (Evans 1998:80).

The entire concept of *khwan* loss suggests a fear of social life that is not integrated. That this loss of *khwan* is associated with the fear of death can be seen in that *khwan* often flees into the forest. The prolonged absence of *khwan* can result in death. Foreigners and foreign places are also dangerous to the community as can be seen in that *khwan* rituals are regularly performed for visitors to Laos and to welcome home family members who have traveled abroad. In the former ritual, the goal is to integrate the foreign guest into the community. In the latter ritual, the *mawphawn* calls the *khwan* back from the distant foreign land and instructs it to stay at home where it is loved and needed.

Human life is defined in contradistinction to the forest, where the spirits of the dead take up residence. The forest serves as a symbol of nature that provides for human life in many ways, but which is also dangerous, easily offended, and sometimes chaotic. The forest is a symbol of amoral power (the force of nature) and immoral power (chaos and death). Nature's dangerous unpredictability reaches a climax in unforeseen death, drought, floods, and disease. To harness nature's power and stand against it demands that villagers recognize their interdependence. Every available member of the ritual recipient's friends and family is recruited to attend *khwan* rituals. This group support provides power that integrates the person's body with his or her *khwan* through the presence of the kin group. Those who do not integrate are anti-social and dangerous people, who usually live in the forest or in the mountains.[2]

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[2] Many Lao view the Sino-Tibetan people groups as unpredictable and dangerous, which is most likely related to the tendency of these people groups to live in isolated and forested areas.

The drive for integration in the social body is reflected in a number of other symbolic ways in *khwan* rituals. The meat offered on the *phaakhwan* tray to the *khwan* and other spirits must be whole pieces. At the wedding *khwan* ritual, widows, and divorced women are not allowed to directly participate in the preparations because they represent incomplete married life. In similar fashion, the *mawphawn* must be a married person. After the ritual ends, the *phaakhwan* offerings and gifts are consumed by those in attendance. During this mealtime, it is typical to have someone ask you to join them in drinking whiskey. This custom is only socially satisfying if both parties consume the entire glass together. When the *phaakhwan* is offered, everyone in the room reaches out to touch the *phaakhwan,* while those in the back who cannot reach touch the elbow of someone in front of them who can. The cotton string that is draped atop the *tonbaasii* is passed around to everyone who can reach it, so that everyone is holding one unbroken strand of string, a symbol of their common blessing.

There are also examples from other contexts. For example, handicapped people are viewed with deep fear and suspicion. They are generally not invited to *khwan* rituals, since they are not whole. And on occasion, a person will do you the favor of pulling a gray hair out of your head while you are in sitting in a church service; the hair is always returned to its owner. While body excretions are viewed with disgust, they are also viewed as potent traditional medicines for healing the ill and strengthening the elderly.

On the social level, the Lao have been amazingly slow at accepting new ideas and life styles into their culture. Many foreign powers have occupied Laos, but few have left any lasting marks on Lao society. Thailand, by comparison, has had astonishing success

at incorporating foreign people and ideas. While a foreigner can feel a part of Thai society in a matter of months, it may be years before a similar level of social integration is achieved in Lao society.

The Lao also have a long tradition of persecuting people of other religious faiths. The chief reason the government gives for the persecution of Christians is that "they cause disunity." While it is generally assumed that the political stability in Laos is due to the dictatorship of the LPRP, on a social level this could be viewed as part of the drive toward social integration.

Factors that may help explain the high level of group orientation in Lao society are the systemic poverty, vulnerability to nature, and geo-political weakness. It is not surprising that the chief obstacle to the communication of the gospel today is the generally accepted view that Christianity is a foreigner's religion. All the above examples are evidence of the ways in which the Lao carefully guard their social boundaries as a means to protecting the group. This vigilant protection of the social group is also typical of societies where hierarchy and ritual are a means to structuring interpersonal relationships (see Table 4, Group and Grid Typologies, for Douglas' cosmologies).

While *khwan* rituals embody the belief and experience that the community must be integrated to remain prosperous, this does not mean that there is no individual expression. There is in fact a significant place for individual expression that is often attributed to the teaching of Theravada Buddhism (cf. Klausner 1993:389ff). Whether or not Lao individualism originated in Buddhism, it is governed under the tutelage of the

group, at the levels of household, village, and *müang*.[3] In times of need, all individuals are expected to sacrifice—in fact, it is their moral responsibility--for the welfare of the group to which they belong. Those who stand apart from this integration are a threat to the stability of the group.

The social body is organized in such a way that each member can count on help when the dangers of nature or other amoral powers (e.g., foreigners) are present. Group orientation in Laos is somewhat unique in that it is occasional.[4] That is, group obligations are activated in times of necessity. In these times (e.g., rice planting, harvest, building a home, and so on), the village cooperates quickly and easily. In between these occasions, each person is free to pursue his or her own interests, as long as in doing so they do not threaten the well-being of the group as a whole.[5] Individual strategies are pursued through group alliances. As a result, the social hierarchy has numerous power peaks, that in Laos look like centers of *müang* power. In Laos, the regional *müang* systems of the past still live on in the form of provincial government administration and informal educational, economic, and political alliances.

The intensity of the group's influence on individuals in rural areas differs, of course, from the urban context. The face-to-face relationships of the village increase the level of group. The power of the group in the village finds its center in the household and

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[3] Clearly, the most significant levels for the Lao are those of the household and village. The *müang* level of society can be inactive in village life for long periods of time, but when active it has a significant impact on village life. Of course, for Lao who live in Vientiane Municipality, the *müang* level is almost always present.

[4] This is more true for Lao men than for Lao women.

[5] This agrees with M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky's description of hierarchical societies (1990:45).

in the extended kinship relations between households. There are also fewer and weaker alliances and, consequently, fewer power peaks in the village.

Urban areas do not completely lack face-to-face relationships. Even Vientiane Municipality, by far the largest city in the country, is a collection of villages. Village residents in the city still know most, if not all, the people living in their village. But work patterns in the city require mobility, and the sheer numbers of people mean more impersonal relationships and a decrease in the power of the group over the individual. In this context, the strong value placed on the group is maintained by multiple layers of hierarchy and multiple peaks of power that take the shape of strategic alliances. Impersonal alliances built on common individual goals are held together by the urgency of the needs, rather than kinship relationships. There is, not surprisingly, an increase in the use of amoral power strategies at the *müang* level. These strategies are pursued through informal contractual agreements that require inferiors to obey and to make payments to superiors.

Grid in *Khwan* Rituals

Three major dimensions to the structure of Lao relationships have already been identified. The categories that structure Lao society are older and younger, male and female, and ritual specialist and layperson. All these categories are present in *khwan* rituals.

The distinction between those with ritual knowledge and those without is most clear in *khwan* rituals when a *mawphawn* conducts the ritual. This is certainly the case in the majority of instances. But even when there is no *mawphawn* present, male elders with

ritual knowledge normally conduct the ritual. Ritual knowledge overlaps, then, with age

and gender classifications. It should be noted, too, that ritual knowledge is not the same

for men and women. Men know the right words and actions for the ritual. Women know

the way to prepare the *tonbaasii*, *phaakhwan*, ritual offerings, and gifts.

In regard to the older-to-younger category, I have in another monograph made the

following observations:

> [T]here is a proper social order in dealing with the loss of *khwan*. The loss
> of *khwan* is not something a young person confidently diagnoses and deals
> with. The diagnosing and treatment of the loss of *khwan* always involves
> the village elders. Elderly women oversee the arrangements of the ritual
> by calling upon a male (who represents now a third level of the hierarchy)
> specialist, or the *mawphawn*. The *mawphawn* pays homage to the three
> jewels of Buddhism (though he is in the role of a Brahman priest he
> acknowledges the superiority of Buddhism), and calls upon sacred beings
> to bless and witness the ritual. The entire hierarchy of Lao society (which
> for the Lao includes non-temporal spiritual beings) is brought into play for
> the *suukhwan* ritual . . . the *phaakhwan* tray clearly symbolizes the
> hierarchy of Lao society. It is constructed in three to five tiers. The food
> placed on the *phaakhwan* is again part of a hierarchy of foods. This
> hierarchy is determined by classifying some foods as ones that give a
> person strength and others which do not give strength. Lao will confirm
> that dark (black) meat gives more strength than does white meat. Black
> ducks are better for you than white ones. No Lao can live without the
> strength that rice provides no matter how much bread is available. The
> foods of greatest value and at the top of the hierarchy all appear on the
> *phaakhwan* tray: bananas, boiled eggs, chicken, rice and rice whiskey. The
> candles on the top tier of the *phaakhwan* are made to the length of the
> circumference of the initiates head, which holds the highest position in the
> hierarchy of the body (Bailey 1998:95).

The hierarchy of the body is also in clear view. The *khwan* is said to enter and exit

from the crown of the head. Feet are kept out of sight by tucking them under the body

while sitting. Blessings are acknowledged from each person who ties a string on the wrist

of the recipient by raising the hands in the prayer position to touch the forehead while

bowing the head slightly in deference. The higher social status of elders is also

reinforced, since the blessings given by the elderly are the most auspicious ones. Because

they have lived longer they have acquired more merit and more ritual knowledge than those who are young.

The importance and shape of gender classification in society can be seen in several of the root metaphors in *khwan* rituals. The greatest visual symbol of hierarchy in the ritual is the *tonbaasii* that is built to resemble Mount Meru, the center of the Buddhist cosmology. The visual symbol speaks to the hierarchy of the nation and the cosmos, a hierarchy that does not fully exist in village relationships, but that is acknowledged by villagers. The *tonbaasii* is a root metaphor for the moral power of adult males who have nearly all been ordained as monks at some stage in their lives. It also addresses the ultimate aspirations for the life of a *müang* lord who rules as king at the peak of this hierarchy. While the vision of *nibanna*[6] as a detachment from this life (pure moral goodness through wisdom) is not absent, it is not one that is operative in daily life, except for a few aesthetes.

Villagers acknowledge the hierarchy of the spirit world and political-economic powers over their lives. They deal with the cosmic and political power hierarchies through ritual displays of submission and payments. But village relationships are not ordered with the same degree of hierarchy as the *müang* level of society.

As has been shown, many villagers are related by marriage or through maternal kinship ties. The root metaphor that speaks to the household social setting of *khwan* rituals is the *phaakhwan*. The *phaakhwan* is the family meal table and, along with the

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[6] *Nibanna* is the Pali word, the Sanskrit word is *nirvana* (Terwiel 1994:191). Terwiel argues that the concept of *nibanna* among rural Thai is of "total happiness without end." The same seems true in Laos, and I have tried to capture this concept by referring to the Lao (also Thai) idea of *khwaamsuk*.

household itself, it belongs to the sphere of the moral power of mothers. While the *tonbaasii* may or may not be used in a *khwan* ritual, the *phaakhwan,* and the gifts and offerings on it, always serve as the focal point of the ritual. Even the *phaakhwan's* shape, that is, round and flat, speaks again of equal relationships. Meals are open to anyone nearby at the moment. The tray that doubles as the family meal tray is a symbol of Lao hospitality, so essential in kin-oriented relationships.

Two other powerful metaphors that bring female moral power and village relationships into focus are cotton string and rice. Both are products of nature that have been domesticated by villagers. In a similar way, women are also symbols of domesticated natural power through their ability to bear children. They are at the same time the supreme example of self-denial, and all Lao rituals recognize their moral strength. At the same time, their power is considered dangerous to men, and menstruation taboos are strictly followed.

Cotton is grown, harvested, and spun by women. A single cotton string is held by everyone in attendance at a *khwan* ritual, while the *mawphawn* calls and blesses the *khwan*. This string is the symbol of the community's common aspirations for an auspicious life that can only be achieved through the help of kin. Rice is, of course, a primary offering that is always present on the *phaakhwan*. While all villagers, male and female, participate in the agricultural process, rice is considered to be female, and it is always women who prepare it for meals. Women also provide the largest share of labor in farming rice.

While *khwan* rituals certainly address the entire social condition of Lao society, a double reference can be discerned in their meaning. These are shown structurally in Table 25 below. In this table the male role is metaphorically oriented towards the amoral power of the *müang* hierarchy, Buddhism, and the moral power of men as monks. The female role is shown to speak to the concern for the integration and interdependence of the village group, and the moral power of women as mothers. Women do make use of amoral power but their primary orientation in the household is towards the moral power of caring for others.

TABLE 25

LAO SOCIAL STRUCTURE ORIENTATIONS

Gender	Social Structure	Level of Social Life	Ritual Life	Ritual Role	Power
Males (Females)	High Grid (Hierarchy)	*Müang*/Nation	Buddhist Temple	Monk	Amoral (Moral)
Females (Males)	High Group (Integration)	Household/ Village	Household Rituals	Mother	Moral (Amoral)

Summary of Grid and Group in Lao Society

A Lao person perceives the self as located within a web of family (household and village-oriented) and utilitarian (*müang*-oriented) relationships (see Table 25). The self, as conceived of as *khwan*, is responsive to the gifts and appeals of those in the web of relationships. Those persons are the ones who can restore the *khwan*'s confidence and inject the courage and happiness needed to face the challenges of life.

As before, these relationships are structured in terms of older-to-younger relationships, and the corresponding emotions of security and obligation. Village relationships are determined by birth and rarely change, but *müang* relationships can and do change depending on the circumstances. *Müang* relationships are primarily utilitarian, and are used to manage the necessities of life. To *müang* structure a person gives his or her allegiance depends upon the degree of power and resources afforded by the *müang* structure. For this reason, a change of allegiance from one *müang* structure to another is not uncommon.[7]

The Cosmos: Time, Space, and Causality

In discussing the Lao view of nature, the relationship between humans and the cosmos comes into play. It is important to point out at the outset that the Lao perceive the cosmos as animated with spiritual beings. The power of nature does not merely reveal the mechanical workings of scientific laws, but reflects the action taken by the spirits and gods that control physical matter.[8] The hierarchy of human society is a reflection of and for the hierarchy in the spiritual cosmos. In hierarchical societies the powers of the cosmos are seen as perverse, but tolerant (M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990:27). Both nature and *müang* power structures are easily offended, hard to predict, and frequently hold the key to prosperity in the village.

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[7] For a good illustration of this change, see Souvannavong's article "Elites in Exile," where he describes how a Lao woman who headed up an association of Lao exiles (with an anti-LPRP ideology), for years, decided to return to the Lao PDR and join the reconstruction of her native country (1999).

[8] There is, however, a tension here between the more mechanical *müang* level of ritual and social experience, and the more organic-relational household level of ritual and social life. The key issue here, as I will try to make clear, is the lack of kin-oriented relationships at the *müang* level.

The essential task for most Lao is to manage these higher powers through "mapping the boundary line" between the cosmos and society (M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990:27). The concern for mapping is portrayed in the keen attention given to the cardinal directions (space) and astrology (time) when new ventures are begun.[9] Both ritual and technological experts play significant roles in helping society manage these powers. There is, however, a sense in which predictability is never achieved, and this is a constant source of social anxiety. On the other hand, the ability to demonstrate some success in managing the resources of the cosmos is a symbol of the legitimacy of *müang* power. On an individual level, this ability establishes a person's honor and moral superiority.

Lao society abounds with "ritual experts." But traditional experts are being challenged by foreign-born and foreign-trained technical experts. The rise of foreign trained experts not only challenges the role of religious ritual experts, but also the customary relegation of power to elders. This shift is taking place because many Lao technological experts are young people who have had access to Western training.

An observation regarding the Lao view of cause and effect is that everything happens because of a prior action. Things do not just occur without a reason. They may take place because of human actions (which always result in *karma*, good and bad). They may take place because spirits are propitiated, or forgotten. Things may happen because a ritual was done well, or poorly. The gods may be behind what has happened and their

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[9] Astrological books pinpoint good days and bad days for *suukhwan* rituals, weddings, erecting the posts for a new house, making a start on a new venture (e.g., opening a business), and naming a child. The only important events in a Lao person's life that are not scheduled in this way are those that can not be scheduled: birth and death. See R. B. Davis who analyzes northern Thai culture in terms of time (1984).

motives may be difficult to determine. The all-pervasive belief in cause and effect is not the same as the mechanical view of the universe at the heart of individualistic America, but is a belief steeped in living out the consequences of social and spiritual relationships. These relationships need constant attention to be kept in balance.

At the village level there is less order in relationships, and less hierarchy. Accordingly, there is less need for precision in identifying cause. At the level of *müang*, a reason must be identified for why things are going badly. Today in the Lao PDR, bad things that happen are typically blamed on an external enemy or local minority groups connected with these external enemies.[10] High group and high grid societies are vulnerable to reactionary movements. Indeed, the Lao PDR continues to battle with the Hmong resistance in the countryside, and anti-LPRP propaganda in the mass media generated by the exiled Lao refugee community.

<u>Human Nature</u>

"Views of human nature are inextricably tied to social relations" (M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990:33). To a larger degree than in other cosmologies, hierarchies equate society with the sacred. In traditional Laos and in Thailand, this equation can be seen in the role of the king as a model Buddhist, and the role of the Buddhist hierarchy in sanctioning the legitimacy of the political order. Even in Laos today the Communist Party is seeking the ritual blessing of the Buddhist community (Evans 1998).

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[10] In the past the LPRP identified the enemy (¦½-ᵃø) as the US and its lackeys. Today, more often
than not, the enemy is Christians who do not follow the ancient Lao religious traditions.

Immoral action is conceived of in tangible ways. Sin is failing to perform one's assigned social and ritual role.[11] Among the Lao this concern for roles is conveyed in the insulting phrase, "You don't know who is older and who is younger than yourself!" Morality is not defined in terms of an absolute standard, but in terms of proper relationships and the good of the community and the nation. Actions that are less than ideal but which do not impact the community in negative ways will not be encouraged, but are generally considered harmless. In the same way, pre-marital and extra-marital sex, if handled discreetly, are rarely challenged. Furthermore, sin can be counteracted through rituals performed by experts who manage the harmony of human relationships by balancing the spiritual forces in the cosmos.

Humans make mistakes or they sin because of ignorance and a lack of instruction. This view reinforces the role of social institutions in teaching society's members their ritual duty. As a result, education is typically done through memorization and ritual repetition. Correct outward performance of roles is valued over internal commitments to social values. Again, this reflects the priority of the good of the community, achieved through the conformity of its members.

Abstention from ritual implies consent with the system. A lack of high turn-out to civic events reflects poorly on the system, so attendance is mandated, and discussion controlled (M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990:65). This can be seen clearly in that every temple and civic event demands that at least one person from each household

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[11] The Lao view sin at two levels. The first is more in the category of mistake. It is the failure to fulfill obligations in social roles and is referred to as *phitphaat* (zyfrkf). The second category of sin is much more serious and is referred to as *baab* ([k[). It is used in reference to serious acts against others such as murder or adultery.

attend. In these meetings I have rarely witnessed someone voicing opposition to the policy of the hierarchy. Opinions are formally sought out, but are controlled and shared in the form of testimony to the value of the policy of the leadership.

Individual and community purification is sought ritually. Pollution is derived from people and actions that confuse the social order. Thus, non-conformists are seen as dangerous people spiritually and socially. Christians, in particular, have been accused of causing the anger of guardian spirits by refusing to participate in the rituals of appeasement. In southern Laos there is a practice of accusing socially-deviant people of being possessed by the evil spirit *phii pawb*. These people are subsequently forced to relocate outside of their village.

The carefully-delineated structure for social roles is mirrored in the careful control of the body. The Lao pay careful attention to high and low dimensions of their bodies, and also to auspicious directions related to the where they sit and sleep. Men and women of reproductive age are careful not to touch one another. In a similar way, body control for balance is highly valued in Lao dance.

Suffering and misfortune are understood to be the automatic punishment for the violation of formal social rules which, by extension, are understood to violate the order of the cosmos. At the macro level, *karma* plays the role of reward and punishment. But even this law, which governs the consequences of social action, can be managed by ritual experts through alliances with earthly and cosmic powers.

<u>Meeting Human Needs</u>

In regard to the meeting of human needs, M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky make the following argument:

> People, we insist, do not just have needs, nor do they just have resources. They are, to some variable extent, able to manage their needs and their resources. Indeed they are able, within limits, to define what shall count as a need and a resource, a proposition that comports with the everyday observation that, under similar conditions, some people feel more needy and some more resourceful than others. Short of needs and resources relating to biological survival, with its unmistakable signs, as in famines, needs and resources do not define themselves; they are man made (1990:42).

The approach to managing resources and needs differs, depending upon where a person is positioned in the Lao hierarchy. Those who share control of the hierarchy maintain themselves by "imposing numerous ranked patterns of needs upon the individuals who compose [the hierarchy]" (1990:45). The obligations assigned to each role define the needs of each individual. A Lao government official of a certain rank must protect the prestige of his rank by having a driver, a suit, and a pair of sunglasses. The official is not free to "choose" or not choose these things; they are required of him. In the same way, visiting foreigners must sit at the head of the table, and upon chairs if at all possible. To do less damages their status as visiting experts, and this impacts everyone because experts are a key to managing the output of resources for the community.

Within its multiple levels, the hierarchy is manipulated by individuals through agreed-upon strategies that "increase their share of the cake as long as, in doing so, they do not overtake the group above them" (1990:45). Outside of these *müang* power alliances, individuals have little room to maneuver.

In difficult times, the hierarchy demands sacrifices of all its members even as it reminds them that they never had it so good. In like manner, the Lao news media is consistent in comparing the hardships of colonialism and war with the relative prosperity and peace of the communist era.

Preferences

Blame is rarely attributed to the system itself in a hierarchy (1990:59). It is normally diffused generally, or projected on to foreign bodies that appear to threaten the overall good. In the same way, Hmong slash and burn agriculture is blamed for the deforestation of the countryside without any mention of the government-approved contracts with logging companies, or the wide practice of upland farming by northern, lowland Lao. The persecution of minority groups also bears witness to this theme.

Envy must be avoided at all costs in the hierarchy of Lao society, because inequality is institutionalized. Before the fall of the monarchy in 1975, the superiority of the Lao had been ritualized for hundreds of years in the New Year's festival in Luang Prabang and in the myths that surround the festival. This inequality is built into the categories of lowland, midland, and highland Lao, since the last two categories refer to minority groups whom the Lao generally see as inferior. Each year minority groups such as the Hmong (highland Lao) and the Khmu (midland Lao) traditionally paid homage to the Lao king. The king would then make ritual payment to the midland Lao for the land that the lowland Lao took from them when they migrated into the area (Archaimbault 1964:69).

I have personally witnessed Lao employers explain to their employees, at great length, that, while their salaries, were low, they were receiving countless other benefits from the employer. *Khwan* rituals can also be used to encourage an individual who feels oppressed by the hierarchy and is ready to leave. Eventually, most employees give in to the situation, and continue working at minimal wage. Of course, with the now-expanding economy, employees do occasionally opt out and look for better compensation from a new employer.

Economic growth is seen as possible if there is a collective effort to control the needs of the group. By collective (but not equal) sacrifice, wealth can be accumulated for investment that will benefit all. Of course the benefits are not distributed equally. An example of this is the government's call for a collective effort to decrease imports and pay government taxes. For the most part, neither of these efforts are carried out without strict government enforcement, since confidence in the redistribution of this wealth is very low. But people near the top of the hierarchies seem to know when to back off from exerting too much pressure. When too many people seem to be dropping out of the game, the employers buy off discontent by negotiating taxes on imports and income. Today in Laos, no one expects that you will actually pay the required government tax. Payment of import and income taxes is negotiated with the collection officials as a way of acknowledging the hierarchy, while keeping lower strata players in the game.

Lao Worldview Themes and Social Change

Even when a social environment changes, a group's worldview is still slow to change. Our mental habits for perceiving and interpreting life experiences may resist the contradictions presented by new experiences for longer than might be supposed:

> Anomalies are explained away, pigeonholed, ignored, or just not seen. . . . Were every surprise or disappointment to send us scrambling for an alternative theory, both science and life would lack the necessary stability. . . . But ways of life . . . cannot exclude reality altogether. . . . As evidence builds up . . .or as ways of life do not pay off for adherents, doubts build up, followed by defections. A persistent pattern of surprises forces individuals to cast around for alternative ways of life . . . that can provide a more satisfying fit with the world as it is (M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990:69).

With this statement in mind, Evans' observation that the dominant trait among Lao people today is backwardness takes on new significance (1998:190). Social change in Laos can only be discussed with the issues of poverty and lack of opportunity at the forefront of the discussion. Many Lao have been left out of the new economic growth and alternative opportunities are few and far between. There is a large gap between what Lao young people watch on Thai television and their everyday social realities.[12] No wonder the United States embassy is so stingy in issuing visas to Lao who apply to visit the US. With so few political and economic opportunities inside the country, many Lao try to leave the difficult conditions for what they feel might be greener pastures.

For those at the bottom of the ladder of a hierarchical society, there is always the temptation to retreat from the hierarchy when scarcity prevent delivery of the goods

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[12] In a survey taken in Vientiane Municipality in 1998, 94 percent of the respondents said that they had watched Thai television during the preceding week (Institute for Cultural Research 1999:66). Inexpensive Chinese-made satellite dishes make television accessible nearly everywhere in the countryside as well.

promised. This has certainly been the case in the Lao PDR where poverty and lack of opportunity characterize life for the great majority.

Strangely, the failure on the part of the hierarchy to live up to promises always comes as a surprise, even to those who have the least to gain, because the nature of a cosmology dictates that everyone believes in the system. People adopt a cosmology that best explains and justifies their social situation.

In the face of unfulfilled promises from the hierarchy, it is tempting for some to form dissenting egalitarian groups within the larger society.[13] Normally, people will only risk this when they have run out of options. These minority groups display a higher level of loyalty to the group than the larger society, but their interpersonal relationships tend to be fairly unstructured. They are normally persecuted by the ruling hierarchy, and are correspondingly known for their criticism of the system as a whole. The leaders of these groups often function as prophets and shaman who struggle against the powers that attempt to control the members of their small egalitarian group. Within these groups the system is blamed for all the evils that the members experience.

Very few such movements have survived in Laos. Both the Hmong *Chao Fa* resistance movement and dissenting political parties in Laos have been dealt with harshly. The repression of egalitarian groups in Laos has been a trademark of the LPRP.

Another option is to drop out of the hierarchy and choose an individualistic cosmology. Some Lao are attempting to make this switch, to a limited degree, in at least

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[13] Here I am using M. Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky's discussion on the options available to members of a cosmology of hierarchy when circumstances force them to consider changing their cosmology (1990:69ff).

two ways. First, there is a steady flow of government employees who, tired of low pay (or in the cases of some rural area teachers, no pay), are leaving civil service positions to work in the market; as consultants or as employees of the large foreign aid organization community. But this move does not really allow these people to adopt an individualistic cosmology, since the hierarchy in Laos touches every area of life. Kinship obligation and government involvement in all areas of social life continue to require everyone to play the hierarchy game, or to drop out altogether. A person can only fully drop out of the social game of hierarchy by leaving the country. As a result, many wealthy Lao and Lao with kinship ties in the refugee community outside the country are traveling abroad for extended periods of time. Some never return.

The third option for members of a hierarchy seeking a change in cosmology is a move from hierarchy to fatalism. This move represents a serious fall from grace. It is a view of the world shaped by the complete absence of ability to manage one's own needs and resources. It is a life lived under an all-powerful "Big Man" who dominates resources and lives. In this cosmology, which is probably shared by poverty stricken farmers and oppressed minority groups (e.g., Khmu Christians), the world is seen as capricious. Luck, established through private magic, becomes the only hope.

While there have probably always been Lao who have lived with a fatalistic view of the world, the increasing economic disparity in Laos may be driving larger numbers of people into this cosmology. For now, at least, the majority seem to be willing to believe that playing the social-hierarchy game will allow them to realize their dreams. Indeed, 62

percent of the respondents to a survey in Vientiane Municipality answered that hard work is the best way to succeed in life (Institute for Cultural Research 1999:68).[14]

Describing Lao society as high grid and high group should not be taken to mean that it is perfectly integrated and without social dissent. Today both grid and group are under unprecedented pressure in Laos. Outside pressures are being placed upon Lao social organization through the nation's membership in the United Nations, ASEAN, the presence of the Internet, the large number of resident foreigners, and the frequency with which Lao students are studying and traveling abroad. But as these pressures increase so does the social drive to integrate, protect the hierarchy, and punish deviance with *müang* (state) power.

Finally, the flexibility with which Lao people abandon moral standards in order to access power that can address their pressing needs is not as surprising as it first appears. The hierarchy in Laos has existed to unite the Lao against nature and oppressive, external, political powers. The context in which this has occurred can only be defined as a significantly vulnerable one, politically, and economically. Oppression (primarily in the image of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and communism) and poverty have characterized life in Laos at all stages of its history, including the present one. One resulting characteristic of Lao people is the tendency to realign themselves with powers that appear

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[14] In his attempt to deal with the individualism that he sees in nothern Thailand, R. B. Davis, using Douglas' typology, suggests that the cosmology of the *Müang* Thai people is fatalistic (1984:72). As I have already indicated, there are some situations in Laos where this seems to be the case, but if the overall situation of lowland Lao is taken into account with Vientiane as the main focus, then a hierarchical cosmology seems to be the best characterization.

potentially more beneficial. The search for potent and reliable power that results in these frequent realignments is not disloyal, it is simply necessary *champān* (¥¿-À¯ñ-).

Scarcity of opportunity and resources, coupled with an increase in non-kin relationships is resulting in an increase in use of amoral power to meet felt needs. This takes the shape of negotiating with amoral spirits, government officials, and business people, in ways that meet needs through allegiances with the power they control.

Lao Worldview Orientations

The analysis of Lao worldview themes demonstrates some basic orientations that can be made even clearer by thinking in comparisons, using a model developed by Kraft (1997). These comparisons use Western, North American culture as the main point of comparison. Since I am writing primarily for a Western audience, these models can help clarify Lao worldview orientations by way of contrast, at least for most readers.

Kraft's model in Figure 14 compares worldview orientations of supernaturalism to naturalism, groupism to individualism, and personalism to mechanistic. The first two orientations have several sub-dimensions. For instance, supernaturalism is broken down into spiritistic and relativistic orientations.

If Lao worldview is approached through Buddhism, there will be a tendency to see it oriented towards the right side of Kraft's model. *Karma* lends itself to an absolute and mechanical view of the world. Relationships at the *müang* and Buddhist levels tend to be more mechanical in nature than relationships at the household and village level.

Some scholars have also emphasized what seems like a tendency for individualism and personal freedom in Lao society (cf. Evers 1969 and Potter 1977).

Again, at the *müang* level of social experience, individualism is increased by the choice

among *müang* allegiances, but only to the extent that individual choices do not endanger

the group.

SUPERNATURALISM	⟵ ⟶	**NATURALISM**
SPIRITISTIC	⟵ ⟶	MATERIALISTIC
RELATIVISTIC	⟵ ⟶	ABSOLUTISTIC
GROUPISM	⟵ ⟶	**INDIVIDUALISM**
DEPENDENCY	⟵ ⟶	INDEPENDENCY
SECURITY	⟵ ⟶	FREEDOM
PUBLIC	⟵ ⟶	PRIVATE
PERSONALISM	⟵ ⟶	**MECHANISTIC**
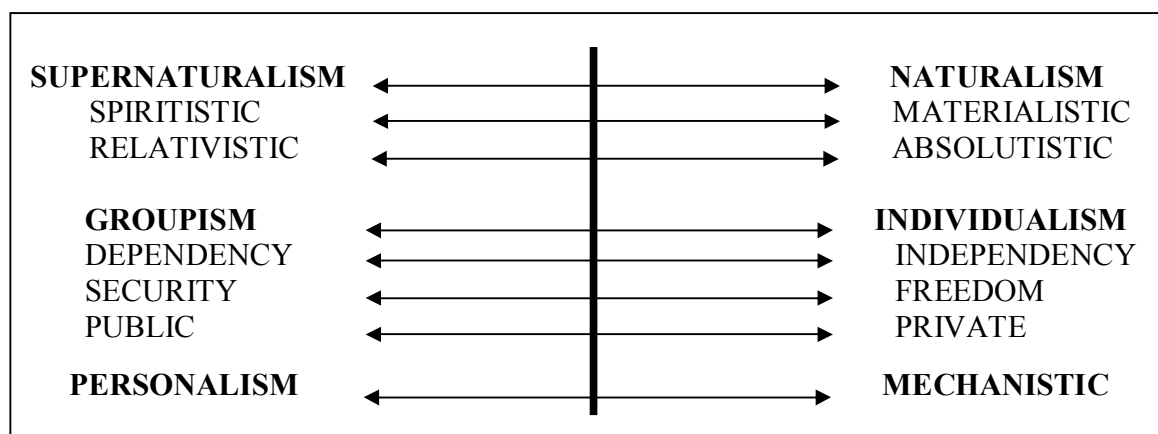
FIGURE 14

SCALES OF WORLDVIEW ORIENTATION
(Kraft 1997:ch. 9, p. 2)

Looking at Lao society from the grassroots up provides a very different

perspective. From the perspective of the household, the Lao worldview appears to

consistently line up on the left side of Kraft's model. The animistic roots of the Lao

provide them with a supernaturalist orientation in which all of life is lived in the midst of

relationships with spirits.[15] Explanations of cause and effect always assume the

involvement of spirits, gods, and other *müang* powers. As was demonstrated, *khwan*

rituals are highly group oriented. The village relies on the interdependence of its

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[15] In a similar way, Terwiel has argued that Thai society and its practice of Buddhism is thoroughly animistic (1994:241ff).

households that are characterized by a morality of interpersonal obligation. The more absolutist laws of *karma* and the *müang* are tempered by the Lao ability to negotiate relationships with local spirits and government officials alike. How can these different observations regarding the worldview orientation of the Lao be reconciled?

It is essential to recognize that both orientations come into play, to some degree, in every social situation. Crucial to the orientation of each situation are the emic categories of *baan* (village) and *müang,* and they should be kept in mind in dealing with this anomaly (see Figure 15).[16] It is tempting to see these distinctions as simply a difference between rural and urban society; a factor that is relevant but not the central one.

I suggest that the crucial issue in dealing with these orientations is in seeing the role of maternal kin at the household level of relations and the general absence of these kin at the *müang* level of relations.[17] Within the maternal kin network of relationships, the Lao worldview tends towards the left side of the model. There, religion is focused on relationships with *khwan*, ancestor spirits, and gods and goddesses. Relationships are established through belonging to the group, and hierarchy is less important than at the *müang* level. There is a high level of security, a high level of interdependence, and little, if any, private life. To the extent that there are female alliances that extend into the *müang* level relationships, they are activated in keeping with the left side of Figure 15.

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[16] It is worth reiterating that *müang* power relates to any and all powers that are higher than the village. It tends to associate with amoral powers, but to also tap into moral powers.

[17] It may be recalled that members of a household are primarily those related by birth or marriage but can also include adopted fictive kin who live in the house, or with whom very personal and interdependent relationships have been made.

Outside the maternal kinship network of the household, relationships take on a mechanistic and ritualized character in the sphere of *müang* power. Religiously, the power works to legitimize male leadership, Buddhism, and the hierarchy of the nation

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                                                               │
│   ◄──────── HOUSEHOLD-VILLAGE   MÜANG ────────────►          │
│                                │                              │
│   SUPERNATURALISM ◄────────────┼────────────►  NATURALISM    │
│      SPIRITISTIC    ◄──────────┼──────────►     MATERIALISTIC │
│      RELATIVISTIC   ◄──────────┼──────────►     ABSOLUTISTIC  │
│                                │                              │
│      GROUPISM       ◄──────────┼──────────►    INDIVIDUALISM  │
│      DEPENDENCY     ◄──────────┼──────────►     INDEPENDENCY  │
│      SECURITY       ◄──────────┼──────────►     FREEDOM       │
│      PUBLIC         ◄──────────┼──────────►     PRIVATE       │
│                                │                              │
│   PERSONALISM       ◄──────────┼──────────►    MECHANISTIC    │
│                                                               │
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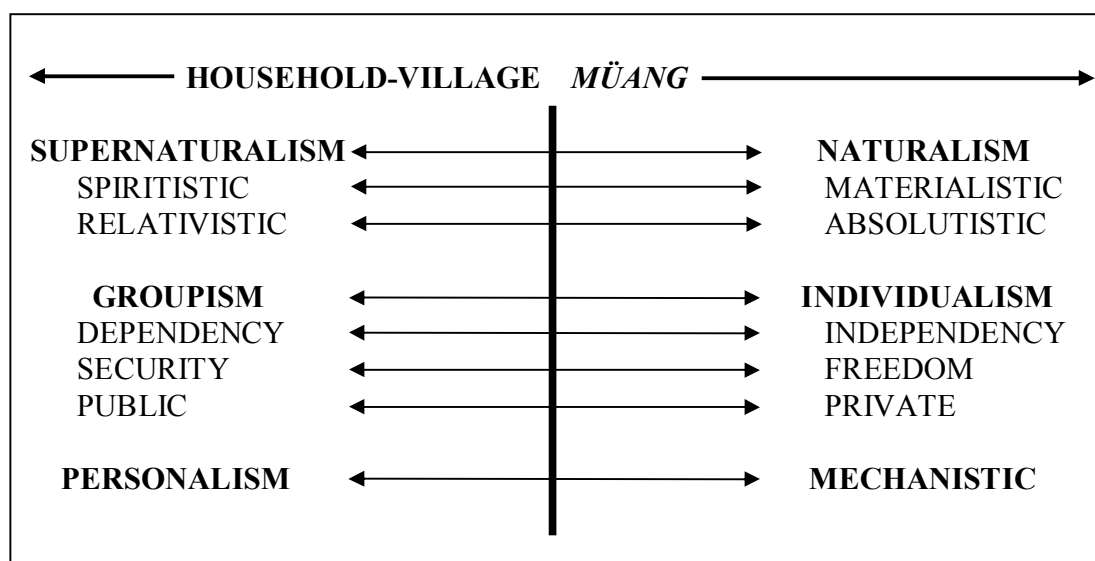
FIGURE 15

HOUSEHOLD/*MÜANG* WORLDVIEW ORIENTATIONS
(Adapted from Kraft 1997:ch. 9, p. 2)

state. Relationally, gifts establish contracts for mutual benefit, with the patron benefiting the most. Hierarchy is acutely vigilant, and loyalty is dependent upon the ability of the patron to keep the expectation of rewards realistic in the minds of the clients. Multiple subsystems of *müang* power allow the individual to make choices about allegiance, and to switch allegiances from one sub-*müang* to another while staying within the larger

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müang system. At this level people are never secure, but the presence of a private life increases individual freedom and the sense of personal power.

Summary

Considering that this description of the Lao worldview is valid, the next step is to think about how this worldview will both impact and be impacted by the gospel. The missionary's task is not to figure out how to fit the cognitive gospel message into Lao worldview categories. Rather, the task is to engage Lao people by communicating relationally so that Christ can be incarnated in their world. This process will impact the gospel and the worldview assumptions of both missionary and Lao people. Before spelling out the implications of the Lao worldview for communicating the gospel in Chapter 8, I will first illustrate in Chapter 7 how the Lao worldview might impact the process of understanding the gospel by reading two biblical narratives in terms of the Lao worldview and my own.

CHAPTER 7

READING THE BIBLE WITH LAO WORLDVIEW THEMES

So far, a hermeneutical approach to culture has been used to come to a deeper understanding of the patterned perception of the Lao, and of how their perception shapes and is shaped by social relations in Laos. It now remains to suggest how this interpretation should shape strategies for communicating the gospel. There are two pieces to this last task. First, I consider how the communicational intention of the missionary can be expressed within the high grid, high group context of Lao social structure. I will treat this component in Chapter 8. Second, I consider the impact of Lao worldview themes (or in Sperber and Wilson's terminology, "the cognitive environment") on the textual information provided in the gospel message and communicated by missionaries. In the present chapter I treat this component in a preliminary and illustrative way, by reading two biblical narratives with Lao worldview themes in mind.

In Chapter 4 I argued with Sperber and Wilson that an audience fills in gaps that they perceive in the textual information provided by speakers. The audience typically does this by supplying information out of their own worldview. Significantly, the audience has more confidence in what they supply to the text from their own worldview than in what the speaker supplies. Consequently, the first purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the impact that Lao worldview perception might have on the textual information supplied by two biblical narratives.

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To this end, two biblical narratives are read with Lao worldview themes in mind, using Ricoeur's hermeneutical method. It will be recalled that this hermeneutic consists of an initial guess about meaning, followed by a structural study of the text. The structural study of a text then works in two directions. First, it critiques the assumptions that were brought to the reading of the text in the first guess. Second, it opens new horizons of meaning related to the context and traditions of the reader.

The biblical narratives were chosen because they address significant Lao cosmological issues. The second purpose of this chapter then is to allow these biblical narratives to challenge and expand the assumptions in Lao grid and group social dynamics.

The first reading is the story of God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15. The biblical theme of covenant addresses morality at a social level rather than as an absolute standard, and therefore fits the cosmology of the Lao. Covenant as a means of addressing the quality of social relations through promise keeping speaks to grid issues in the Lao social context.

The second narrative is Paul's instructions regarding the Lord's Supper in Corinthians 11. The text addresses the group issue of the church's identification with the body of Christ. While baptism addresses a ritual of transition (or passage), the Eucharist conveys the meaning of living in the community of the people of God.

The third purpose of the chapter is to illustrate how the vehicles of narrative and ritual can be effective communication strategies in the Lao context. As is clear by now, the hierarchical cosmology of Lao society makes ritual a crucial means of restricted code communication. At the village level where hierarchy is less and interdependence high,

storytelling is valued over the written word (which is male and Buddhist in orientation) as a communicational medium. Traditional hierarchical cosmologies tend to concretize meaning in ritual and narrate it in myth.

The fourth purpose in this chapter is to allow these texts to address two crucial theological issues for the Lao context. Genesis retells the story of God the Creator revealing himself to a man who lived in a world of multiple gods, a world very similar to the Lao religious world. 1 Corinthians describes a ritual that deals with the power of ritual sacrifice (offerings in the Lao context) and the belonging that comes with participation in the ritual sacrifice. The community context of the Lord's Supper echoes the communitas experience in *khwan* rituals.

These interpretations are offered as a first step in a dialogue to be pursued with the hermeneutical community in the Lao PDR. They are illustrations of how these texts might tend to be read by the Lao as a means of highlighting the dynamics in interpreting a communication of the gospel. Only the Lao people, of course, can provide a genuine Lao reading of these texts.

The Covenant with Abram in Laos

The story in Genesis 15 is sandwiched between the accounts of Abram rescuing Lot and refusing to profit from the loot taken in the raid, narrated in Genesis 14, and Genesis 16, where Abram takes Hagar as a wife in an attempt to fulfill God's promise of descendants.

Genesis 14 highlights Abram's dependence on God, rather than on "the nations" around him for his prosperity. This is so even despite the fact that Abram joins forces

with other tribes to rescue Lot, a story which demonstrates his relationship with the

nations. Genesis 15 tells the story of God's promises to Abram in the covenant, made

through the use of a local ritual. Yet, the story of Hagar in Genesis 16 demonstrates the

depth of Abram's doubt in God's ability to make good on his promise of an heir. Rather

than trying to narrate the story in Genesis 15 without interpreting it, the text is provided

below:

> 1) After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." 2) But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3) And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." 4) Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." 5) He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." 6) Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. 7) He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." 8) But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" 9) So the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon." 10) Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. 11) Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. 12) As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. 13) Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. 14) But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. 15) You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. 16) In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." 17) When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. 18) On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates-- 19) the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, 20) Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, 21) Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites" (Gen. 15:1-21).

Guess as Understanding: Genesis 15

Using Lao worldview themes, I will highlight the parts of this story that might be immediately interpreted in ways that reflect the cognitive environment of a Lao audience. The issue here is not whether or not the assumptions made should be considered exegetically accurate. I am simply considering how textual evidence presented to the audience in Genesis 15 would probably be understood in a first reading. Upon hearing the Genesis narrative the text will appear to the Lao to have gaps in it. Sometimes these gaps are missing details in which case they will be filled quickly by Lao worldview assumptions. In other cases these gaps are created when the information does not fit Lao worldview assumptions. In the latter case the story will only make sense if it is re-interpreted. In both cases, the filling of gaps is done with information and experiences drawn from Lao worldview themes. The information added or reinterpreted must be taken seriously, since it can be expected that the Lao will place a great deal of confidence in it.

The very first thing a Lao must do in reading about Abram is to figure out where he fits in the hierarchy of the cosmos (grid). At first, Abram could be seen as a character of high mythical status, like *Rama*, or he could be seen as a folk hero, like *Siang Miang*.[1] A decision on this may not be finalized until the end of the story.

Assuming that the entire narrative of Genesis has been read up to this point, the Lao will know that Abram is away from his home and in a foreign land. This defines Abram's status as vulnerable and yet one that might result in unexpected fortune. It

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[1] *Siang Miang* is a favorite Lao folkhero. He is a peasant who has a wisdom that often confounds wise and noble royal characters (see *Siang Miang:Compiled Oral Traditions*. by P. Phuangsaba 1998).

would not be surprising to see a man away from home since traveling is a male right that women traditionally do not share. But it is very unusual to see that he has taken his family with him. Many Lao at this point would assume that he had to leave home due to some misfortune (e.g., war), or a bad relationship in his village. This may have actually been the case when Terah, Abram's father, took them out of Ur with Canaan as his destination (11:31). Only later is the reader told that God told Abram to leave his homeland (12:1). The narrative does not describe all the other issues involved that may have indicated to Abram that this was what God wanted.

For the Lao there is also the vulnerability of being without land. Land is the key because to live a normal life people must farm rice. Without land, people normally fall into some sort of servitude. Abram's vulnerability and landlessness would suggest that he is a poor farmer who has lost his land due to war or some other misfortune.

The issue of Abram's kinship connections is another important Lao concern (group). Here again Abram seems socially vulnerable, because he has left behind his older and younger relatives in his home village (the place of his wife's birth). There are few who can be trusted outside his home village. Abram is certainly anxious about not knowing how to act or knowing who will assist him in the new land. Who will be there to rescue him when calamity strikes?

With this serious social and economic vulnerability, Abram would certainly need to seek the protection of the guardian spirits of his village before he left home. The text, of course, does not say he did not do so, and since people in this situation typically would do so, there is good reason to believe that Abram did the same. It is also typical before a trip abroad to perform a *suukhwan* ritual with family and friends to call a person's life

essence *khwan* and instruct it to stay with him on the journey. The *khwan* must be told over and again not to be lured off by the things in the new land, and to come home with Abram, otherwise he will fall ill and experience misfortune.

Since Abram will be a long way away from the spirits of his home, he should be careful to show respect and give offerings to the local spirits of the land he enters, so as to pay the proper respect and avoid offending any *saksit* powers in the new area. On the other hand, if a god has sent him on this journey, Abram may find wealth and honor. There certainly isn't much of either in the village, so if either one is to be found it is normally found abroad. In any event, Abram would be wise to bring gifts with him to assist his efforts in building new alliances in the new land.

The fact that God continually speaks to Abram tells us that Abram has ritual knowledge like a Lao shaman *maw yao* or a priest of a guardian spirit *cham*. While his ritual knowledge is not like that of the Buddhist monks (who do not need to communicate with spirits because of their higher status), Abram must be someone of great merit or power, since a god speaks to him. He might be like *Phra Ram*.[2] Abram's spiritual power makes him an auspicious person to be with, but also somewhat dangerous. He would be the sort of person one would go to for advice about the future, the lottery, or a love affair. Furthermore, it is not surprising that this god finds it necessary to tell Abram not to be afraid. Everyone is frightened when they encounter the spirits or gods.

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[2] This is the Lao rendering of the name, *Rama*, the key character in the Indian epic, *Ramayana*. The story has been contextualized by many of the dominant Southeast Asian societies. *Rama* often communicated with the gods.

Earlier in the story (Gen. 1) the god who speaks to Abram has been described as the one who created the world. Perhaps he is *Khun Buulom*, the divine ancestor of the Lao,[3] or perhaps he is *Phra Indra*.[4] Gods of this sort are far away and they have little interaction with the daily concerns of ordinary people.[5] A relationship of this god to Abram would seem unusual.

Abram has no children. Perhaps this is because of his past sins *baab* or perhaps due to the past actions of his wife Sarai. But one or both of them must have made merit at some point because now, look, the god is promising them a child! It must be because Abram performed the meritorious act of belief in this god who is his guardian (Gen. 15:6). This act of merit leads to an additional promise of land! Abram is a very lucky person indeed.

Abram is not sure he can trust the god, so now he makes a contract *baphi'* with the god by bringing offerings that the god has requested. It appears that this god wants to enjoy the taste of a three-year-old cow, goat, ram, dove, and a pigeon (Gen. 15:9). A

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[3]The issue of whether or not the Lao believe in a creator God is complicated by the layering of religious traditions that comprise the Lao cosmology. Siraporn Nathalang has written in regard to the Thai that, "Buddhism does not pay much attention to the creation of the world, thus Buddhist Thai people generally do not believe in God as world creator, as do Christians. However, the increasing knowledge regarding the culture of the *Tai*-speaking peoples indicates that ancient *Tai*, before adopting Buddhism, did believe that there were creators of the world and of human beings" (1997:56). This is born out in the Lao context in the study of various creation stories. One interpretation of these stories is that *Khun Borom*, the son of the sky god *Phii Thään* or of *Phra Indra* (depending on which story line you follow), who sent the Lao patriarch and matriarch *Puu Yüe* and *Yaa Yüe* to populate the earth. See Appendix I for a summary of some of Lao creation myths taken from a paper I wrote previously (Bailey 1999).

[4]This is the Lao name for the Indian god, *Indra*, who is often taken to be the highest god in the pantheon of Lao gods and spirits.

[5] Not long before this paper was written, I was dialoging with a group of Lao Christians and non-Christians with whom I worked on a development project in Laos. When I asked the non-Christians who they thought the Christians were referring to when they prayed to *phrachao* (the Lao word that Christians use for God) several answered that they were not sure. They thought perhaps we meant one of the Lao deities mentioned above.

sacrifice this large is expensive, and would make quite a powerful contract. Abram demonstrates that he has the ritual knowledge to prepare the sacrifice.

Now look, Abram has a bad dream and a vision of bad luck regarding his descendents. They will become slaves in Egypt. Perhaps he prepared the ritual in the wrong way. Or perhaps the negative outcome is due to his past actions. Or perhaps the god tricked Abram. You can never be sure what powerful guardian spirits will do. They can do what they want to do because they have power. A person with ritual knowledge would have to explain the dream and the vision to us.

Abram seems to have negotiated *baphii* with the god for an heir and for land. Or maybe he didn't. This is a strange story because it says that the god made the promise, not Abram. Usually people give gifts to spirits and then make promises in return for obtaining what they want from the spirit.

A Structural Reading of Genesis 15

There are at least three areas where a structural study of this story will critique and expand an initial Lao understanding of the story.[6] First, the most critical aspect of reconfiguring this story for Lao people is in the understanding of the character of the God who speaks to Abram. This reconfiguring begins in Genesis 1, but is not fulfilled until later biblical passages describe God as the Creator, as the God who has no beginning and as the God who made all things (including the spirits and the gods). The notion of a god who exists prior to all things opens up the possibility of the Lao seeing themselves in the

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[6] I assume that a structural study would eventually take into account the entire biblical narrative in order to properly interpret this particular passage.

cosmos differently (Bailey 1999). The notion of God as Creator will, however, interact with Lao notions of creator deities (see Appendix I).

Second, the structure of this narrative stands to reaffirm the Lao belief in the power of ritual. A Lao reading of the structure of this story might be as follows. Abram has a problem--he needs a child and land. He pleads his case with the god who told him to leave his home. The god asks for a meat offering. Abram performs the ritual and makes the offering. Abram eventually receives what he wanted.

Here I am on less sure ground than when I first encountered the Lao worldview. My Western culture taught me to disregard ritual as generally symbolic, powerless, religious action. It might have emotive effect but nothing more. My cosmology of individualism taught me that what was important was the internalization of the meaning of the ritual. Here, I am challenged by the Lao insight into the power of external ritualization of meaning and the spiritual empowerment that may lie behind ritual (see Kraft 1995:98-100). The Lao world is built upon the power of ritual gift giving to establish relationships with people and spirits/gods. Nothing would seem more reasonable then for Abram to give God an offering of meat as a means of establishing a relationship of obligation with God and obtaining the things he needed.

Perhaps there is a more instructive conclusion on ritual for both Western missionary and Lao readers to discover. Perhaps the rituals that God ordains are powerfully effective in positive ways in our lives. This seems to be the case especially where God's covenant relationship with his people is the concern (e.g., baptism and the Lord's Supper).

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The third implication of a structural study of the narrative is a reconfiguring of the notion of relationship. Here there is a confrontation between deeply-seated concepts of patron to client structure (older to younger) of all relationships, merit *bun* (in the Buddhist religious context), and the biblical idea of covenant. In the Lao world, people who are worthy receive blessing. In the Bible the Creator God searches out people who will trust him. The narrative structure challenges the typical sequence for establishing a relationship. The story says that it was God who called Abram out of his homeland and initiated the covenant with Abram (Gen. 15:18). Certainly the biblical understanding of covenant cannot be established well from reading this one passage by itself. But this short narrative does say two things that can begin to reorganize Lao assumptions regarding relationships of covenant.

First, God, as the patron in the relationship, makes the covenant promise with Abram, the client. This is not unheard of, but it is unusual in Lao society.[7] This dynamic suggests a God who is interested in the plight of the world and the people he has created. This interest becomes personal in God's words of comfort to Abram (Gen. 15:1). God not only knows Abram's name but also comforts Abram. This will of course need developing as other biblical narratives are brought into play.

Second, Abram is approved because of his faith, rather than because of something he gave to God. The ritual seals what has already been acted upon to establish the relationship. This is, again, an unusual exchange between a human and a superior spirit.

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[7] The older--superior--one in the relationship usually does not initiate interaction unless he or she needs the assistance of the younger--inferior--one. For example, as was mentioned in relation to the myth about the Buddha and the rice goddess, when entering a room the inferior one will always *nob* (show respect to the older one) first.

There is clearly a tension between what the Lao would expect in a relationship between a god and a human, and what the narrative says about this interaction. As Ricoeur argues, the structure of the narrative itself as a worldless entity carries the potential for metaphorically opening up new visions of being in the Lao world.

A Possible Lao Appropriation of Genesis 15

I cannot, of course, say exactly how this narrative would be appropriated by Lao readers. For one thing, each individual would appropriate it differently given his or her different places in Lao society and life. I will, nevertheless, venture some guesses about how the story might be appropriated given the worldview themes identified in this study.

First, the encounter with a God who made all things, including the other spirits and gods, certainly puts God in the category of a large *saksit* power. At the same time, this God calls Abram by name, and counsels him ("Do not be afraid"), opening up the possibility of relating to a *saksit* power without fear and on a personal level. The level of intimacy in communication between Abram and God is a challenge to the typical assumption that powerful spiritual beings are hard to know, distant, and often unpredictable.

This Creator God goes so far as to enter into an interdependent (household-kinship level) relationship of obligation which God initiates, and to which he binds himself. This expanded view of the Creator in relationship with humans, if accepted and acted upon, has the potential of being associated with the security and unconditional love that Lao link to household kin relationships. This is an attractive possibility, since one of

the most important aspects of *khwan* rituals is aimed at comforting and instilling confidence by driving away the fear of bad luck and death.

Second, the view of ritual in the narrative as something instructed by God, rather than something based on human ritual knowledge, opens the possibility of performing meaningful rituals within the context of covenant relationships. Most Lao live a good deal of their lives ritually making and fulfilling obligations with spirits and people. While many will confide that this system is expensive and cumbersome, few dare to neglect it. The Genesis 15 story offers a world in which the Creator initiates ritual relationship and binds himself to its obligations regardless of human faithfulness to the agreement. This establishes a world in which keeping promises is even more powerful than ritual performance. Right relationships with God and others can empower ritual performance ordained by the Creator God of the Bible.

Even so, I suspect that there is more for me to learn from the Lao view of ritual in the life of faith. My individualistic cosmology colors this illustration in spite of my efforts to keep it in check. Hierarchical societies require ritual to enact the meaning of day-to-day social relations. Pastors must be ready to take up the role of ritual expert in worship, as ritual will continue to play a powerful role in Christian faith just as it has in Lao traditional religion, and just as it did in Abram's life. I also sense the Lao know much more than I do about living up to the obligations involved in covenant relationships and about bringing offerings to God with a joyful heart.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to my own cosmology is the externalization of meaning and the binding of truth to relationship in such an intimate way. I am more comfortable with an internalized faith in an absolute standard that rules with impartiality

over my relationships. I tend to want the law of Moses even while the Lao, with Abram,

cherish the promises of God that established the mutual obligation of the covenant in the

ritual sacrifice of that day.

1 Corinthians 11 Read in Laos

The context of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 is set in a letter of instruction from Paul,

who helped plant the church in Corinth along with Aquila and Prisca. In the letter Paul is

trying to correct a number of things that have gone off course in this church, but his

confidence in (1:7) and his love for (16:24) the Corinthian Christians is firm. Below is the

text of the narrative:

> 17) In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. 18) In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. 19) No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. 20) When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, 21) for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. 22) Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not! 23) For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24) and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25) In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26) For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. 27) Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 28) A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. 29) For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30) That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 31) But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. 32) When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. 33) So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other. 34) If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it may

not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions
(1 Co. 11:17-34).

Guess as Understanding: 1 Corinthians 11

A teacher (*aachaan*) criticizing his students is a common-enough event in Lao society and, from a Lao point of view, completely appropriate. Certainly, Paul the teacher had good reason for scolding the Corinthians. The relationship of teacher to student is parallel to the basic structure of Lao society (patron to client). There is an assumed obligation on the part of the Corinthians and a caretaker role on Paul's part (grid).

The existence of division in the church in Corinth is a serious issue. No household, village, or nation can survive long with division (group). Above all things, relationships should be maintained, even with people who deal with you unjustly or unkindly. Harmony in relationships is a key to everyone's well-being. Some relationships can be left behind, but not household relationships. Harmony is a very serious issue, and fighting within a household can bring shame upon the household members and even result in the threat of retribution from the ancestral spirits of the house.

The situation is becomes more serious when the reader realizes that the Corinthians had not fulfilled their obligation to be hospitable at the meal table. The Lao may be economically poor, but they are generous with their guests at the meal table. Generosity is key to establishing good relationships and a sense of mutual obligation necessary for maintaining interdependence. But the most serious issue is the improper performance of the ritual of the Lord's Supper. This is certainly going to make this household vulnerable to spiritual retribution.

Paul, as the religious teacher with ritual knowledge, is going to put things back in their proper order. This is the kind of ritual knowledge that you can trust because it is a tradition *hiidkhawng* handed down to Paul directly from the master teacher, Jesus. This is similar to the way the elders with ritual knowledge tutor the younger men in the performance of ritual and the secret things that elders need to know.

Assuming that the word "bread" (staple of the Middle East) is retold as "rice" (staple of the Lao), the breaking of the bread (rice) is a sign of hospitality and kinship.[8] The passing of the cup of wine is also recognizable. Men who take rice together regularly cement their friendship by drinking rice whiskey together. No one would think of insulting the host by not drinking rice whiskey with him, and sealing agreements with whiskey is not unusual.

Jesus' statement that the wine is a new covenant agreement sealed in his blood is a powerful ritual statement. Blood, as the source of life, makes sacrifice effective. Strongmen always eat raw, minced meat *laab* because of the strength in blood. They also enjoy drinking boiled duck or pig blood. Everyone knows blood makes a person strong, but everyone also knows that men with this kind of strength (associated with the forest) are sometimes dangerous and unpredictable men.

By symbolically drinking the blood in the ritual, the participants proclaim their allegiance to Jesus. The word "Lord," of course, refers to a ruler, and this means that Jesus has a ruler's *müang* power.

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[8] If this word is not changed the Lao audience will associate Jesus and this ritual with Western foreigners. Bread and foreigner are things that go together in the Lao view of the world.

Paul's warning about taking the Lord's Supper without recognizing the body and blood of Jesus is understandable. Improper performance of ritual is always dangerous. It would clearly offend Jesus. Those who do bad things receive bad things in return, so it is no wonder that some of the people in Corinth are sick. The gods and ancestral spirits often punish us when we neglect them. The poor manners of the Corinthians were sinful. Their actions show that they did not know who was older and who was younger. It is really scandalous that they did not wait for one another at mealtime.

A Structural Reading of 1 Corinthians 11

A study of the structure of the passage on the Lord's Supper given in 1 Corinthians 11 reveals a church plagued by social division. The issue of the Lord's Supper comes up because it was being carried out in a way that accentuated the class divisions in the church. Paul's statement that "one goes hungry, while another gets drunk" (11:21) seems to indicate that the wealthy were not dining on the same menu that the poor were in the community (Dykstra 1992:19). In the common meals of the day the wealthy were often seated in special places of honor and served better food than the less important guests (see 11:22; cf. Morris 1987:156). The Lao would likely see this aspect of the situation as typical and would not necessarily be offended by these inequalities.

Division is addressed in 1 Corinthians beginning in the first chapter. The division comes in the form of factions who have lined up behind Apollos, Paul, and Peter. It shows itself in sexual immorality (chapter 5), lawsuits, and prostitution (chapter 6), controversy over the institution of marriage (chapter 7), eating food offered to idols (chapters 8-10), and the disorder in their worship (chapter 11). Paul's goal is not only to

give them practical instruction, but to bring them together by reminding them that Christians have "the mind of Christ" (2:16), and thus the ability to discern the mind of the Lord in difficult matters.

The Passover meal *sedar* followed a ritual pattern similar to that in the Lord's Supper. But the meaning with which Jesus filled the Lord's Supper went beyond the context of the Passover celebration to touch on the whole Old Testament sacrificial system. In the Passover meal, Jesus deliberately speaks of his death in terms of covenant, thus connecting his death to the covenant ratification in Genesis 15. Likewise, when Jesus says that his body is "given for you" the atonement sacrifices come to mind.

Meals and feasts played a significant role in the culture and eschatology of Jesus, and of the Jews in general. In Isaiah's description of the apocalypse (25:6-9) he sees a feast with the nations in attendance. This feast comes in an era when death will be overcome and every tear wiped away. In the gospels Jesus picks up this motif to describe the kingdom of God. In Matthew (8:11) and Luke (13:29) the great feast of the kingdom will be attended by people who come from every direction on the globe. In Luke 14 Jesus paints the picture of the kingdom as a feast with the host giving orders to "make them to come in, so that my house will be full." Finally, John uses the feeding of the multitudes to recall symbolically the connection between the feast of the kingdom and the Lord's Supper (Jn. 6:2658).

Certainly, Jesus' communicational intention was to build on the Jewish experience in common meals, the sacrificial system, and the eschatological feast, but this does not preclude the ability of the Lord's Supper to also re-configure the meaning of the Gentile cultic meals of the mystery religions towards Christ. Andrew Walls writes the

following in this regard: "Christian conversion involves redirecting what is already there, turning it in the direction of Christ" (1997:148). For the Gentiles it is likely that they associated the Lord's Supper with the cultic meals of their past, just as the Lao would certainly associate this narrative with their own religious rituals.

The basic pattern in Gentile cultic meals was ritual separation and purification, followed by the dramatic reenactment of a god's or goddess' life. The members of these cults believed that in reenacting the life, suffering, and rebirth of the gods, they were participating in their powers and salvation. The culmination of these rituals was a common sacred meal. The meals were open and democratic, in contrast to the Jewish common meals. As in Lao rituals, every member of the cult participated equally in the meal. Another difference was that Jews did not believe that God was consumed in the meal, or that God actually ate the meal with them the way many Gentiles did (Dykstra 1992:15-19).

Paul's goal in Chapter 11 is to bring Christians together in the right kind of worship and then move them out to exercise the gifts they have been given by the Spirit. He tries to move them beyond the issues that divide them, to the common confession of "Jesus is Lord" (12:3) as a foundation for a mutual understanding. He hopes that this will allow the use of the gifts given by the Spirit to the body of Christ.

Paul's discussion of the gifts does not lose sight of the power of the two most important Christian rituals, the baptism of the believer and the Lord's Supper. The former

is a ritual of individual transformation and initiation, and the latter a ritual of intensification and transformation for the individual within the community.[9]

> Christ is like a single body with its many limbs and organs, which, many as they are, together make up one body; for in the one Spirit we were all brought into one body by baptism, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free; we were all given that one Spirit to drink (1 Co. 12:12-13).

This union of Christians in the body of Christ is built on one confession (1 Cor. 11:3), one baptism, and one Spirit, which we unite in through partaking of the Lord's Supper. This is union with his body's sufferings and his new promise (12:13). Love holds this union together (chapter 13) and informs our conduct and use of the Spirit's gifts (chapter 14).

In 1 Corinthians 11:23 Paul identifies the source of his authority to speak on the topic of the Lord's Supper: "I received [it] from the Lord." This is similar to his claim to have received his understanding of the gospel from the Lord himself in Galatians (1:12). Paul's rendition of this tradition that he received from the Lord in 1 Corinthians 11 has the structure of an early church formula for the Eucharist service.

Echoing the pattern of Jewish common meals, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and then explained it as his body given for others who would share it. Then, after the meal,[10] he took the cup and explained it as his blood poured out as the ratification of a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). Jesus says that both the bread and the cup are to remind us of him. Then there are words of declaration ("proclaim the Lord's death

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[9] See Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou (1999:302-322) for a discussion on three different kinds of rites.
[10] Many Christians overlook the early context of the Eucharist as part of a full meal (see 11:25).

until he comes") which do not allow the participants to merely sit comfortably in their fellowship.[11]

For both Jew and Gentile the account of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians did not leave them reflecting on their new status in Christ alone. This ritual also had missiological implications. Once the identity and standing in the body of Christ of these Christians was confirmed (a group issue) they were sent out to proclaim Christ's death until his return. The Greek word used by Paul (καταγγέλλω), 'to proclaim or announce,' is almost always used in the New Testament to refer to "proclaiming the gospel." It always means an activity done towards people and never one done towards God (Morris 1987:160). In these words it becomes possible to see that the ritual of the Lord's Supper brought about not only a change in self-understanding by solidifying the identity of these Christians as members of the body of Christ, but also by moving them outward to proclaim the gospel. The ritual consequently can be understood to have an evangelistic function, as well as a function in solidifying the community.

That Paul was conscious of this evangelistic function of the Lord's Supper may be seen again in the story of Acts 27. In this story, Paul is being taken in chains to Rome when the ship he is traveling on is in danger of being crushed upon the rocks in a storm. Building on work done by Bo Reicke, Geoffrey Wainwright understands Paul to be using the Eucharist ritual in an evangelistic way (1981:128-129). Here Paul declares to the pagan sailors that their lives are in God's hands and that they will be saved (Ac. 27:25, 31). Then recalling the ritualized language of the Eucharist, Luke writes that Paul took

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[11] Whether these words were spoken by Jesus or added by the early church is not clear.

some bread, gave thanks to God, broke it, and distributed it among the sailors, for they "needed it to survive."

Wainwright writes, "The Lord's Supper should be celebrated *in public* [emphasis his] because it is a sign of the kingdom of God to which the whole world is being summoned." No one should be turned away from the Lord's table who, in seeing the sign of the church, is moved to become a member of the kingdom of God (1981:134).

A Possible Lao Appropriation of 1 Corinthians 11

Reading this passage brings to the foreground again the confrontation between the traditional Lao view of the power of ritual, my own anti-ritual presuppositions, and the scripture's view of ritual. The participants in the cultic meals of the first century seemed to expect a salvation that was "a self-controlled, material, tangible possession that freed them to do as they pleased" (Dykstra 1992:16). In short, it was an effort to access power without moral responsibility. It is clear that Paul and the apostles often had to deal with the tendency to focus on the desire for power without moral obligation when dealing with Gentile converts.[12] "Paul needed to stress that the ritual [of the Lord's Supper] put the believer under the lordship of Christ and was not a [process of mechanically possessing] divine power. For the Christian, salvation [is] a way of daily life and not a matter of occasional cultic observance" (Dykstra 1992:16). So there is a critique of the desire for power without relationship, and there is also instruction regarding the moral obligations that relationships require. This suggests again that the issues of power and morality in the

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[12] See the story of Simon of Samaria in Acts 8, the crowds in Lystra in Acts 14, and the itinerant Jewish exorcists in Acts 19.

Lord's Supper would be communicated best if they were related to the levels of relationship in the Lao household.

At the same time, the text seems to also challenge a completely symbolic view of the Lord's Supper. The real presence of the Lord is implied in 11:24. Furthermore, the improper attitude in the performance of the ritual is said to lead to illness and even death in 11:30. Both of these texts form a critique of my own understanding of ritual and the spiritual empowerment located in the Lord's Supper. The text also implies a cosmology that held form and meaning closely together.

A second critique is offered through the character of the Lord's Supper as a common meal open to everyone willing to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. This suggests an open table to all the nations. It meant Jew and Gentile sharing a common meal and thus identifying with one another in real social terms, as well as in the spiritual body of Christ. Here a new and challenging possibility of living in Laos without cultural division is presented by the text, and calls into question the social divisions and prejudices between lowland, midland, and highland Lao.

The common table that was open to people of all social classes and roles also calls into critique the social hierarchy within the lowland Lao group itself. But this leveling of relationships is not completely unknown to the Lao.[13] It appears in the communitas experience of *khwan* rituals. The fact that *khwan* rituals are performed in the household suggests again that the Lord's Supper be performed as a household ritual marked by

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[13] *Khwan* rituals are not the only rituals where social leveling is done. At the festival of the rockets *bunbangfay* at the start of the rainy season and also during the Lao New Year, *songkaan* social leveling is acted out temporarily. In these ritual periods the social experience resembles *Mardi Gras*, where social tensions are released. In *khwan* rituals social leveling is a means of realizing community interdependence.

hospitality, and a communitas experience of being one Body in Christ.[14] This experience of oneness and equality before God is presented as a vision of what all Christians should strive to realize in this life, even while acknowledging that they will not fully realize the vision until the kingdom arrives.

On the other hand, while equality in relationships in my culture is valued, the reality of equality in American society is questionable. The reccurring question Lao people ask me is, "Why are Black Americans always so poor in your country?" While African Americans are not in fact always poor, the point the Lao are driving at is related to the social division in America that they are able to perceive as outsiders.

But the removal of the walls of hostility envisioned by Paul drives home to a deeper level, third critique for Christians in Laos and America. Our Christian group orientation in Laos and the US has made it clear that only Christians (often baptized Christians) are allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper. This is strictly followed in both contexts, and is defended using 1 Corinthians 11:29. But the structural study of the passage serves as a powerful critique of this practice on several fronts.

First, Paul did not follow this principle in Acts 27. In fact, Paul uses the Lord's Supper evangelistically to call the sailors into the kingdom. Second, Paul specifically states that participation in the Lord's Supper "proclaims" the death and resurrection of Jesus as Lord until his return. Third, it is clear from the structure of 1 Corinthians that Paul is speaking to Christians, not non-Christians, in 11:29.

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[14] In fact, the LEC Christians perform what they call a "thanksgiving to God" ritual *khawbkhunphachao* that is normally performed in a household. Unfortunately, the communitas experience does not normally extend beyond the community of baptized Christians who know each other well. Invited non-Christians often feel lost, and do not know how to relate to the Christians.

The possibility of performing the Lord's Supper inclusively should remind Lao Christians of a crucial Lao value, namely, hospitality. It is unthinkable for Lao people to perform a community ritual and not actively include everyone within view of the ritual. This is a group issue that has already been described as a social drive for integration as a means of dealing with a context of immense vulnerability. This is clearly part of the meaning in *khwan* rituals. In Laos the proclamation of the gospel must be accompanied by hospitality if it is to have any chance of being heard. We cannot proclaim Jesus' summons to "Come!" (Jn. 7:37) and then refuse to allow seekers to the fellowship of the Lord's table.

Finally, it is hard to ignore the related challenge found in Jesus' use of eschatological--kingdom of God--imagery. The Lord's Supper does seem to speak metaphorically to the end-times kingdom feast when the Messiah will be enthroned. This may have been missed by many non-Jewish Christians, but the structural study of the passage revives it for our appropriation in Laos. This eschatological vision of the kingdom speaks of sufficiency and abundance. It was first spoken of symbolically and literally in Jesus' feeding of the multitudes, and later recalled in his parables of the kingdom.

The Lao teleological vision of utopia is centered in the concept of *khwaamsuk* (£¸¾´-¦÷¡). There may very well be a great deal of similarity between this Lao word and the Hebrew concept of *shalom*. *Khwaamsuk* cannot be translated without loss, but as already mentioned, it overlaps with the English language ideas of happiness, good relationships, plenty, and contentment. In a word, *khwaamsuk* is what every Lao seeks. But the vision is not particularly of a life after death, since most Lao assume that they

will be reborn to live many hundreds of times; it is a very concrete vision of what they hope to experience in their earthly lives.

I once asked a group of Lao Christians and non-Christians to draw for me a picture of how they thought the kingdom of God would look. Their drawings were consistently of rice fields, fruit trees, well-built homes, and love between themselves and those close to them. There were no abstract or heavenly visions. The encounter of this vision and the one projected by the eschatological dimensions of the Lord's Supper reconfigure Western concepts of the kingdom of God. They refuse to postpone abundant life to a future kingdom of God and choose to begin the search for an experience of the kingdom now, if even a partial experience.

Accordingly, the future-present contrast touches on the reality of abundance in Western society and the scarcity of resources in Lao society. It is no wonder that Lao Christians and non-Christians alike respond to the gospel best when it comes in the form of practical demonstrations of love that improve their quality of life. The power of ritual in Lao society cannot be ignored, but the most powerful communication of the gospel occurs when the people of God fulfill their covenant obligations to God and their neighbors.

Summary

Clearly the perceived and real textual gaps in biblical narratives are going to be significant for Lao who listen to the telling of Bible stories (and for the few who venture to read them). One of the conclusions drawn from the study of Sperber and Wilson was that a crucial element in communication is the communication of intention. Intention

cannot be communicated properly outside of good relationships (1995:23). Communication in Christian witness must be as concerned with the means of communicating as it is with the content of the communication. In Chapter 8 I conclude my study by suggesting strategic means for communicating the gospel, taking into account the worldview and structure of Lao society.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS

In this final chapter I begin with a review of the purpose and objectives of my dissertation. Then I bring together the model of incarnational communication described in Chapter 3, with the findings on Lao worldview themes. I then turn to the purpose of the dissertation by suggesting communication strategies among the lowland Lao. These strategies are later reflected upon in terms of three levels of encounter described by Kraft (1999). These three encounters are brought together using the biblical concept, of covenant and speech-acts, in order to suggest that the sacramental power of the gospel can be released when communication follows the structure of Lao social relations. I conclude my study by calling attention to some issues that remain unresolved.

Review of the Purpose and Objectives

My purpose in this research project was to develop communication strategies for Christian witness among lowland Lao people in the Lao PDR through a worldview analysis of Lao *khwan* rituals. I intended to do this through four objectives. First, I sought to shape an incarnational model of cross-cultural communication. This objective was motivated by the need to find a paradigm for communication that would seek goals similar to those the Lao people pursue in their communication. The model I arrived at was shaped largely by the hermeneutics of Ricoeur, and was supplemented by Sperber

and Wilson's ideas of intention and relevance in communication. These theoretical approaches correspond with the Lao concern for the influence of social relations on the interpretation of meaning.

The second objective was to describe Lao worldview themes that emerged from a study of *khwan* rituals. The initial analysis of *khwan* rituals looked at emic categories of meaning. Then a structural analysis was done of these categories in an effort to find the ways in which deep level worldview patterns shaped their meaning. *Khwan* was shown to be connected to the life of the individual in the community, and sustained by mothers and rice. Mothers and rice are linked in the symbol system because both give of themselves in order to sustain the well-being of others. Both mothers and rice are symbols of the tension in human society between the force of nature and the moral power that makes social life possible. "The logic of meaning here thus proceeds from the very structure of the sacred universe. Its law is a law of correspondences" (Ricoeur 1995a:54). The worldview revealed in this connection between human well-being, *khwan*, mothers, rice, and household was then translated in terms of six worldview categories. Here I departed somewhat from the original dissertation. While I intended to speak only of worldview themes in the emic sense, in the course of the research it seemed to be more helpful to translate these themes into etic categories. This resulted in the six categories used in Chapter 6. I attempted to impress upon these categories the concern for social relations. As a result, the categories speak to how people relate to the world they live in, such as the group, other individuals, the cosmos, human nature, resources, and choice of values. What emerged as the most crucial element in that discussion was what it revealed about the structure of grid and group dynamics in a cosmology structured as hierarchy.

The third objective was to describe the impact of globalization on Lao worldview themes. Here again I addressed this objective in a way different from my original plan. This was due to the fact that globalization is only beginning to make an impact on Lao society. The comments on social change made at the end of Chapter 4 and Chapter 6 address the dynamics of social change and how they might function in Lao culture more than they analyze the impact of globalization. While many changes of cultural forms could have been tracked in Vientiane, the structure of social relationships there has not changed much at all. My comments, nonetheless, do address those areas where there has been some change in the structure of social relationships.

The fourth objective was to illustrate the impact of Lao worldview on a reading of two biblical narratives. The chapter illustrates how the world of the text, the cognitive environment of the Lao, and my own cognitive assumptions interact. What this chapter could not do is bring alive the social dynamics involved in communication, especially as it relates to intention. The philosophy of Ricoeur, my experience with the Lao, and the gospel itself all seem to say that the quality of the relationship involved in any given communication plays a large role in the way meaning is applied to a message. The arguments for the crucial role of intention in communication, and all the ethical implications that intention carries, need to be tested in the field of real relationships. In the sections that follow, it will become apparent that the suggested communicational strategies are far less concerned with how to shape the content of a message than they are with strategies of conveying intention.

Incarnational Communication

The worldview themes that pattern the perception and interpretation of experience of Lao people do not stand as isolated constructs outside of the ebb and flow of Lao social life. They form a model of and for social relations. From the outset, I have attempted to identify worldview themes in a way that reflects the social realities of the Lao PDR, in terms of the structure of social relations, economic scarcity, dependence, political conservatism, and the multi-cultural national context that the lowland Lao dominate. The worldview categories themselves were described in a way that bring into focus the Lao priority given to relationship with the cosmos and the larger powers in society, within the household/village context.

Historically, the gospel has been communicated to Lao people largely in terms of western cultural and social assumptions about the world. Most of these assumptions have been democratic, rational, psychological, naturalistic, absolutistic, and individualistic in orientation. Most significantly, the gospel has often been communicated with the assumption of equality in relationships (low grid) and with a stress on the value of the individual over the group (low group). It is not surprising that the lowland Lao have been so reluctant to embrace the Christian faith. Conversion to this kind of message and faith community has very often required the abandonment of Lao identity for a hybrid one to which only local Christians seem able to respond, and has resulted in a minority Christian population that is socially isolated from the rest of Lao society.

This is not to say that Western cultural forms did not interact with the Lao worldview. They clearly did. Many Lao Christians, for instance, attribute the same value to the hymnbook as they do the Bible, since they are both sacred books of the Christian

community and were both received from the mission community in a similar way. Both are used in a largely ritual way that empowers the local church and not in the individualistic devotional way that they are ideally used in the West. Scripture memory and recitation are highly valued in a way reminiscent of the value placed on the chanting of *Pali* Buddhist texts. Furthermore, Lao Christians continue to communicate with one another in terms of high group and high grid tendencies. But the communication of Lao Christians is largely within the framework of their own community that resembles a *müang* that is isolated from the rest of the nation of Laos. The Christians are less successful in communicating outside of the church for the simple reason that they have chosen not to participate in the ritual life of the larger society.

Lao Christians who have been instructed in the faith for a time will explain that their isolation is due to their belief that they must be set apart from the spiritual allegiances of the traditional Lao ritual system. But a serious tension remains because the decision to be ritually separate results in disengaging from the most basic relationships Lao Christians would normally have with family and friends. The separation also makes it extremely difficult for Christian witness to be extended to others.

Many Christians are informally trying to participate in the Lao rituals of society at large, doing so discreetly in order to avoid criticism from other Christians, yet often with feelings of guilt and confusion. Many Lao Christians feel conflicted by their recognition that they must participate in the mainstream rituals, at least to some degree to avoid cutting off their social network. At the same time, they are genuinely concerned about compromising their allegiance to Christ and their local church. Those Christians who try

to participate discreetly are often at a loss as to how to participate in a way that will still preserve their allegiance to Christ and provide an effective witness to the gospel.

Initially I began the dissertation research with a view to contextualizing the gospel message to be a more appropriate cognitive fit in the Lao world, but without much thought to Lao social relations. Two things have redirected my research.

The Gospel as Covenant

First, there was the experience confirmed by Kraft that the "knowledge about approach to Christianity, rather than a practicing of approach" was not really solving the problem of Christian witness in places like Laos (Kraft 1999:4). Contextualization has been concerned with cognition because propositional truth concerns have been foremost in the minds of Western missionaries. Most of these strategies of communicating the gospel contextually have relied on the code model of communication.[1]

Contextualization efforts have frequently focused on searching for aspects of Christian theology that share common ground with local worldviews. John R. Davis (1993) finds common theological ground between Thai Buddhists and biblical

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[1] See Bevans' description of the translation, anthropological, and synthetic models (1992). Each of these models is ultimately concerned with knowledge about Christian meaning. I understand the semiotic model of Robert Schreiter to ultimately share the same concern, although his method is clearly different (1985). The praxis model that Bevans describes is closer to the incarnational model I am describing. It lacks, however, the critique of the horizon of the kingdom of God, and is often preoccupied with the horizon of social, institutional justice. As in Marxism, liberation theology will often justify the means to the end goal of social justice in human institutions. Bevans also suggests a transcendental model of contextualization. Again, this model is closer to the incarnational model, but it is grounded in the Western starting place of the autonomous self and does not recognize that "the other" is just as foundational as "the self," as I believe both Ricoeur and the gospel assert.

Christianity on the issue of human suffering.[2] In another important study, Tissa Weerasingha attempts to relate Christian theology to Buddhist philosophy and spirituality (1989). Both of these efforts at contextualization are concerned with engaging a local culture with supracultural--cognitive--truths in local forms.[3] This is a worthy effort, and I will not say that the conclusions of either of the two books is wrong. Weerasingha is speaking as an insider to the Sinhalese Buddhist context, and J. R. Davis has long and thorough experience with the Thai worldview.

There are, however, at least two issues that need to be evaluated in regard to the effort to contextualize the gospel cognitively. First, this approach requires that the ideals of Christian theology be compared with the philosophical ideals of Buddhism. But most people are far more concerned with the practice of their faith and its impact upon their social situation than they are about idealized standards. (Contextualization of this sort often reflects a male bias in its view of religion.) In Laos, and perhaps around the world, the folk level of religion touches on the realities of social life in a far deeper way than does most cognitive level theologizing.

Second, contextualization is often based unconsciously on the assumption that Christian theology is equal to supra-cultural truth. Those who attempt contextualization constantly find themselves caught in the tension of trying to separate the supra-cultural truth from their own cultural values and at the same time deal with the local cultural

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[2] Suffering is a crucial concern of most of Buddhist Asia, as can be seen in the book by the Evangelical Fellowship of Asia, *Christian Suffering in Asia*, edited by Bong Rin Ro (1989), and the classic *Theology of the Pain of God* by Kazoh Kitamori (1965).

[3] When R. B. Davis addresses communication models of ritual, drama, and art he is on the right track, but he does not spell out a strategy for communicating in terms of the social structure of Thai society.

values. J. R. Davis states, "All theological statements are 'local' in that they are conditioned by the historical milieu in which they were formulated" (1993:38). But in a later section of the same book he writes, "If the meaning [of a local form] is intrinsically contrary to Christian perception of truth, no Christian may participate" (1993:137). This statement begs the question, "If all theological statements are 'local' how does he determine what is contrary to 'Christian perception of truth'?" I contend that the word "supracultural" is an oxymoron. Things that are cultural are contingent, by definition. The incarnational model attempts to deal with the finiteness of God's revelation in a particular time and place, and is one of the crucial teachings of Philippians 2:6-11. Incarnational revelation does not provide a transcultural standard, and therefore seems less authoritative. On the other hand, God's incarnated revelation becomes authoritative in each cultural context.

The underlying problem in the struggle to do contextualization is the desire to define the gospel in terms of statements of transcendental truth. I am suggesting that we would do better to focus on incarnating covenant relationships in concrete social realities. At the heart of this effort is the Western concern with an objective perception of reality that is challenged by postmodernism, ancient Asian philosophy and, I contend, the gospel itself. The gospel does not call for objectivity in interpretation; it calls us to interpret the world through our relationship with Christ and the vision of his kingdom.

Contextualization, as an emerging discipline of doing mission has struggled with the question of form and meaning. Douglas' work has shown that the way societies experience the relationship between form and meaning differs according to their cosmology. Hierarchical societies (like Laos) make very little distinction between form

and meaning. In Lao society, as in most Asian societies, the media is often the message received because social relationships define the world in which they live.

While the struggle to discern which part of the biblical narrative should be emphasized has merit, I suggest that how Christian communication takes place socially is more important. Contextualization is a natural and inevitable process that all local people practice upon receiving a message. But a great deal of how a communication is contextualized is based on the relationship that the audience experiences with the communicator.

Whether the outward forms are local or Western, the contextualization of the meaning of any communication is done by the audience, and not by the speaker. The missionary's role is to communicate the biblical narrative in socially relevant ways, to interact with the contextualization of the message done by the audience, and to engage Lao people relationally by keeping promises to live on behalf of the audience.

In Laos the church is being persecuted, but not because of the content of its teaching. It is being persecuted because it has failed to engage Lao people at an acceptable social level. Meanwhile, the missional context of Laos at the household level is one of carefully ordered relationships that emphasize the interdependence of the community. The social structure serves as the means to pursuing *khwaamsuk* in life (demonstrated by the presence of *khwan*) in an environment where life is extremely vulnerable to larger *müang* powers (natural, political, financial, and spiritual).

The Lao are in search of power for living. The concern for coherent, logical truth is minimal. On a daily basis, Lao Christians and non-Christians are far more concerned with accessing power to solve relational, economic, and political problems than they are

with whether or not the gospel is presented in traditional Lao forms and in logically coherent ways. As the Lao interact and gain access to the sources of power outside their borders, they demonstrate their priority for this power by quickly abandoning Lao cultural forms (symbols of their weakness) in favor of ones that appear more powerful than their own.[4]

The Gospel of the Cross and the Kingdom

The second thing that happened to me--and that redirected my research for this dissertation--came in the form of a personal worldview shift, which occurred through my encounters with postmodernism and Lao society. Two things resulted from these encounters to change my view of the world and of the Christian faith. First, postmodernism convinced me that it is no longer tenable to claim to know absolute truth absolutely. Hoedemaker comments on the seriousness of this postmodern critique of ideology that claims absolute truth:

> Christian faith and proclamation may, and will, choose its foundation in the givenness of Christ; but a missiological reflection which takes the epistemological predicament seriously will highlight the eschatological dimensions of this foundation and urge the Christian faith to take these seriously. The result will be a missionary theology that works backwards, as it were, from eschatology to pneumatology to christology. Such a theology will not ignore the foundation but it will not use it in a "foundationalist" way. That means that the givenness of Christ is a belief that does not stand by itself but derives its significance from the other beliefs to which it has come to be (and continues to be) connected in the construction of the Christian tradition (1999:221). An epistemologically responsible missiology can no longer use a frame of thought in which it is held to be self-evident that we bring "the gospel" from outside to

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[4] Susan Harper has written in a similar way in regard to low-caste converts in India. She writes, "low-caste converts often preferred Western ways to prima facie indigenous ones; frequently the latter signified to them aspects of caste or regional oppression that they wished to avoid rather than embrace" (1995:14).

"culture," as all understandings of "gospel" are part of the phenomenon that is being addressed (Hoedemaker 1999:228).

Postmodernism and the experience of living in Lao society have shown me that human life is grounded in social relationships well before it is grounded in the doctrinal descriptions we use to describe and order these relationships. While they are important, propositional assertions, in Laos and in the postmodern context, they take a backseat to the obligation Christians have to live on behalf of others as Christ did. I am reminded here of Paul's reflection in 1 Corinthians 13 where he says that while we have faith and hope, the greatest thing we have is love.

In response to the call to sacrifical love, I began to look to my own roots in the tradition of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and I remembered that my own tradition emphasized a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The focus on relationship, instead of doctrine, grounds faith in the covenant relationship between God and his people. It also raises the issue of power.

Wherever social relationships are in focus, so too is the issue of power. Power is not power outside of human relationships. Outside of human relationships, power is only an amoral force. A focus on social relationships is a high group concern, and the social science of Douglas has provided me with insight on how power and community work together to organize and give meaning to our lives. I believe that the key issue in the use of power for the well-being of others is found in the means by which interpersonal relationships are ordered (grid) and the way that this order is made effective within the community (group).

Ricoeur has shown that the meaning a society gives to life is established and evaluated in terms of the utopian vision of the society. The Lao utopian vision for well-being is voiced in the word *khwaamsuk*, just as the Hebrews gave voice to their vision in the word *shalom*. The Bible refers to the vision established by the gospel as the kingdom of God. This vision encompasses and expresses the Lao and Hebrew visions. But at the same time the vision of the kingdom of God critiques and expands the grid and group order of every society. The challenge, and subsequent renewal, grow out of the ethic of the kingdom that finds its roots in the death (critique) and resurrection (renewal) of Jesus Christ. Jesus initiated the kingdom through keeping covenant with humanity by going beyond "the logic of crime and punishment" to the "logic of increase and of superabundance" (Ricoeur 1995a:206). "When sin increased, grace abounded all the more. . ." (Rom. 5:20-21). The resurrection of Christ establishes the hope of renewal that Christians express "as a break, as a leap, as a new creation, as a wholly other." Further, "there are many ways of living according to this eschatological event of new creation," but each bears the mark of a hope that makes "freedom the passion for the possible" against the "worship of fate" (Ricoeur 1995a:206). The eschatology of the kingdom of God demands a cross--a theology of history directed toward fulfillment understood as the keeping of a promise. Clearly this vision has much more in common with the covenant relationships of Lao households and villages than it does with the Buddhism of *müang* powers and the fatalism embedded in re-incarnation.

Reconfiguring of faith in terms of covenant (social) relationships shifts the task of Christian witness from proving the gospel to be true to letting Christ prove himself true (faithful to his promises) through his incarnational encounters with people. These

encounters happen most often when God's people engage the people of the world, through God's powerful intervention in our lives, and by allowing the biblical narrative to reconstruct our social vision. Christian witness in Laos (and perhaps in a good deal of Asia) must be aimed at enabling people to discover God in Christ through encounter, rather than through consent to truth formulations constructed in a context very different from the audience's. This is the wider rationality of the Bible that Lesslie Newbigin addresses when he argues that knowledge is dependent upon submission in relationship and an understanding of purpose (Newbigin 1986:79-81).

Ricoeur's hermeneutical reconfiguration of the self as grounded in the relationship with the other, and the ethical vision that results, line up well with Newbigin's argument. On the side of the hermeneutical understanding of the self in terms of the other is the cross that establishes God's covenant with us. We encounter in the event of the cross the fact that God died on our behalf because we have not kept our relational promises. Through encounter with the cross the kingdom is revealed as a new way of being in the world. Covenant relationship with God is not discovered in the context of Laos (Asia), or in the postmodern West as logical truth, but as personal encounter. People discover it by means of the vision of the kingdom that takes them back to the event of the cross of Christ.

The communicational strategies suggested in this chapter assume that Christian witness and the Lao interpretation of the intention of this witness will be accomplished at a place between the dialectical poles of cross and kingdom, that is, between payment through sacrifice for our broken promises and a new hope of living well by living on behalf of others.

The most important contribution of Ricoeur's philosophy to the task of communicating the gospel cross-culturally lies in a fundamental shift of perspective on the task of witness itself. He calls this an ontological shift. This is a rejection of any categorical distinction between object and subject, between myself and others. Here I understand myself as a missionary who fundamentally belongs to those (others) among whom I witness. I will not say "witness to," because witness in the new paradigm demands dialogue and mutual discovery. The dialogue, however, is not without direction, nor is it a journey without a goal. Witness remains confident, public proclamation to the Christian encounter with God, even as we continue to discover all of its implications within the hermeneutical community of God's people. This approach to witness dares to believe that Christian missionaries may gain insights into the meaning of the covenant through engagement with those both in and outside the church, because it recognizes that God has not withdrawn from the world.

Implications for Christian Witness

The paradigm shift of understanding oneself as another suggests that missionary witness is a profoundly ethical act. This ethical orientation is grounded in the view of the kingdom that guides our interpretation and response to the gospel in each context. Missionaries can no longer operate as if their task is only to reformulate truth in culturally appropriate forms that can be easily understood without recognizing that the covenant nature of the gospel demands social engagement within the ethical vision of the kingdom. As a missionary, I experience my vision of social relationships being critiqued and expanded by the ethical vision of the kingdom, and, as I testify to this fact, the ethical

vision also critiques and expands the Lao vision of social relations in ways that extend beyond my testimony.

This ontological shift is not a new or absolute beginning place, but is achieved indirectly through a hermeneutical approach to meaning; this is as much as to say that meaning is achieved in the dialogue of the community of faith. In this way Christian proclamation shapes ethics, and ethics shape the means of proclamation and our response to it.

The final contribution drawn from Ricoeur is the need for missionaries to recognize that their understanding of the gospel is socially constructed, even if at the same time it is still directed toward Christ and his kingdom. This realization does not explain away our relationship with God; it incarnates this relationship within our social context in ways that critique our behavior and expand our vision of community. Our relationship with God and one another is defined in terms of covenant, making and keeping promises that seek the welfare of the other.

Summary of Lao Worldview Themes

Lao worldview themes follow the traditional descriptions found in many animistic societies, however, these themes are woven within two basic social orientations specific to Lao society as depicted in Table 26. On one side, Lao worldview themes are oriented toward household and village relationships. On the other side, they are oriented toward *müang* powers and Buddhism. There is no intention here to suggest that they are cleanly separate from one another, but each orientation has its own concerns. The household and *khwan* rituals are oriented toward the morality of mothers, kinship relations, and life. The

müang and Buddhist rituals are oriented toward the power of fathers as leaders, non-kin relationships, and life after death.

The high group orientation of Lao society is most prominent at the level of the village, where small populations and kinship ties accentuate the influence of the group on the individual. (The high group orientation is also present at the level of the *müang*, but not in the same way, as will be discussed below.) The village as a collection of households united through female kinship ties, ancestral spirits, rice, and the land give

TABLE 26

LAO SOCIAL ORIENTATIONS FOR MEANING

	SOCIAL ORIENTATIONS			
Social Level	Households Ancestral spirits Village Maternal kinship relations		*Müang* Powers Buddhism Powers larger than village Non-maternal kin networks	
Social Dimension	High Group Community well-being Presence of each person's *khwan*		High Grid Individual pursuit of power within a *müang* power system	
Gender Orientation	Female (Male)		Male (Female)	
Power Source	Moral	Amoral	Amoral	Moral
Ritual Focus	Restoration for well-being	Blessing for well-being	Blessing for success	Merit for ancestors
Main Ritual Specialist	*Mawphawn*		Monk	
Spirit Type	*Khwan*		*Vinnyaan*	
***Khwan* Ritual Symbol**	Rice, meat offerings, cotton string	*Pali* chants *Tonbaasii* cotton string, marigolds	*Pali* chants, Buddha images, cotton string, marigolds	
Life Focus	Life		Life/After-Life/Death	

this level a stronger focus on females than on males. Morality at this level finds its locus in the selfless giving of mothers, acted out in bearing and raising children. Mothers, like monks, are people of virtue. Mothers draw on the force of nature and the spirit world out of their closer association with nature, the ancestral spirits, the forest, and undomesticated life. Women are somewhat dangerous because of these associations. In the same way, rice and cotton, (which are products of nature and ultimately find their origin in the forest), are domesticated natural entities that are associated with women.

In the same way, *khwan* rituals are nearly always oriented toward and performed in the household. They display less formality, order, and hierarchy than do the rituals of Buddhist monks. Their primary focus is on the wholeness of life, expressed by the words of blessing. It is for this reason that the ritual specialist is declared to be the *mawphawn,* doctor of blessing. Calling the *khwan* is made necessary by two kinds of circumstances: when there is an absence of blessing, or when blessing is obvious and in need of recognition and protection. Blessing carries with it the assumption of social integration and fulfillment of social obligations within the social structure. The structure is classified in terms of older-to-younger, male-to-female and ritual expert-to-laity relationships. At a deep level it appears that individual blessing also applies to the group, since the assumption of interdependence means that blessing is mutually enjoyed.

The absence of blessing is diagnosed as soul loss, or the flight of the person's *khwan*. The symptoms are loss of courage, energy, health, happiness, peace of mind, or social integration. In some cases, the loss can be dealt with by simply honoring the *khwan* and giving it gifts. In other cases, the loss requires that the offended *khwan* and the

household ancestral spirits be feasted and given gifts. In the latter case, meat offerings are required on the *phaakhwan* to restore *khwan* and the honor of the spirits.

The presence of *khwan* is obvious by observing a person's happiness, peace of mind, good health, and so on. To recognize and protect this happy state of being, *khwan* rituals are generally performed with the *tonbaasii* on the *phaakhwan* and vegetarian gifts for the *khwan*. The intention of *khwan* rituals toward the recognition and protection of blessing reaches its peak in the wedding *khwan* ritual. Here, the ultimately blessed life of *Siidaa* and *Rama* are idealized and associated with the bride and groom. The life of a *müang* lord is the ideal life, but most Lao can only dream of it mythically, through this ritual that projects a vision of *khwaamsuk* that may be experienced in some distant future life.

The high grid orientation of Lao society is most prominent at the level of the *müang* where macro concerns demand more attention to order, hierarchy, and ritual. Household and *müang* orientations overlap, as can be seen by the presence of Buddhist temples in every village and by the kinship ties that influence recruitment to *müang* alliances formed in the government and business world. *Müang* powers are associated with formal male authority that is ritually legitimized by Buddhism, and are also characterized by a decrease in kin relations and the morality of the household, and an increase in the use of amoral force.

Yet the *müang* level of society is not without some sense of morality. This comes into focus when the ritual legitimization of male power in ordaining monks acknowledges the monk's debt to his mother. The morality of *müang* power is anchored again in mothers, but is demonstrated in the selfless life of the monk who denies the passions and

joys of secular life in order to provide opportunities for his kin to make merit. This level of power also has in its repertoire the moral power of the Buddha, and the amoral power of Buddha images and *Pali* texts that are brought into nearly every ritual.

Men and women at the level of the village and the *müang* have at their disposal sources of both moral and amoral power. In most cases, both are brought into play, but when the threat of chaos and death is extreme there is a tendency to rely more on amoral powers than on moral ones. As was shown in Table 26, household relations rely more on moral power than on amoral power because relationships are primarily oriented to kinship. *Müang* relations show a greater reliance on amoral force than on moral power, due to the decrease in maternal kin relations and the dominance of this area by men who generally leave their maternal kin networks.

The high group and high grid social orientation of Lao society is a model of and for Lao worldview themes. These themes are summarized in Table 27.

To develop the reference to globalization in Chapter 5 of the dissertation, I considered the larger view of social change in Laos. I argued that there were not many obvious changes resulting from globalization. But among some general trends, there has been a long and gradual shift going on from traditional regional politics to centralized national politics. The drive toward political centralization has required the hierarchy to establish myths of Lao nationalism that are older than the nation itself. Second, there is an effort to move from allowing people with *müang* power to impose their will on others, to instead limiting *müang* power with civil law, although so far this has been a change in form more than in substance. Third, there has been a change from viewing the world as having scarce resources controlled by those in power, to a view of wealth creation made

achievable through free market enterprise. This change has gained considerable speed since the NEM policy of the LPRP was approved in 1986.

TABLE 27

LAO WORLDVIEW THEMES

Worldview Categories	Worldview Themes
Group	High influence of the group on the individual. Individuals have freedom as long as their actions do not harm the group, and as long as they respect and provide for the hierarchy.
Grid	Relatively formal and ritualized in terms of a patron-client model. The older brother/sister protects and provides for the younger sibling (fictive and biological kin).
Relationship of People to the Cosmos: Time, Space, Causality	Things are animated by spiritual beings. Time and space are structured in terms of auspicious and inauspicious. They can be manipulated to manage the impact of *karma*, spirits, and gods on human success and failure. The quality of social relations with the living, the ancestors, and the gods greatly impact human history. Moral and amoral power are used to change life circumstances.
Human Nature	People naturally make mistakes, so they should be instructed on how to relate correctly to those who are older and younger. Society is a mirror of the sacred. People are not equal. Holiness is behaving properly in regard to the status of others. Sin is to not behave properly in regard to the status of others.
Meeting Human Needs	Needs and resources are assigned based on status in society. The primary strategies for increasing resources over needs is through alliances of mutual interest, established by token gift giving and final payment of the largest share to the older person in the relationship. Experts play a key role in managing natural and spiritual resources.
Social Preferences	Balance and harmony are highly valued, and envy is avoided to protect institutionalized inequalities. Blame is diffused and rarely attributed to the social system. Instead, blame is attributed to non-integrated groups and individuals.

Fourth, women are expanding their role in the market network of Laos and Southeast Asia. This is resulting in an increase in mobility and educational opportunities for women that may result in an increase in the use of amoral force as they increasingly relate to people outside their kin group. Fifth, while the reliance on religious ritual

experts remains strong, the role of technological experts is gradually gaining strength. This may be eroding, or at least reconfiguring, the Lao view of causality in ways that are more mechanical than relational.

All of the change dynamics can be seen to converge on the need to deal with the vulnerability of Lao identity. The most powerful of these broader changes may be the linkage between new ideas of wealth creation, and the centralization of power. Both of these trends have been taken up by the LPRP under the label of "nation building," but still within a context of extreme geo-political and economic vulnerability.

The role of *khwan* rituals in the context of these changes has been to serve as a tool for displaying power, while still assuring the general population that those in power are their kin. Buddhist and *khwan* rituals are being put to use by the Lao government to legitimize and humanize their policies. This trend is emphasizing the amoral power orientation in *khwan* rituals and de-emphasizing the moral power of the household. This trend is not limited to *khwan* rituals. It is part of a larger trend toward the use of amoral power, made possible by increasing urbanization, mobility, and the corresponding breakdown of kinship relations. The increasing disregard for the morality of the household and local monks may stack the deck against the majority of Lao peasants. A cosmology of fatalism may seem like the only option for an increasing number of people, although not yet to a significant extent among the lowland Lao.

It would seem that the widening gap between rich and poor would provide an opportunity for appeals to household morality as a means of bringing equity to the current social game. But people who belong to a cosmology of hierarchy do not generally allow the system to be blamed. For the oppressed there are only two options: they must either

abandon the system, or find ways to manage it in order to pursue their goals, while still satisfying the demands of those over them in the hierarchy. Opting out of the system does not seem to be a viable political or social option in the Lao PDR. The description below of communication strategies comes from the position that communication of the gospel must be done creatively within the high group and high grid social structure, in ways that will discreetly transform Lao society.

Communication Strategies

There are many points at which engagement with the gospel of Jesus Christ will transform the worldview of lowland Lao people. This engagement has cognitive implications regarding truth. It also has normative demands for the Lao context. But the cognitive and normative implications of the gospel must be discerned and decided upon by the Lao Christian community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The missionary task is a separate but related one. The missionary task is to communicate the gospel in a way such that the covenantal intention of this gospel is clearly discernable. This intention can only be conveyed to Lao people through social engagement. Only after people have engaged Christ relationally in terms of covenant can the cognitive implications be incarnated in a local situation. This is true because the relational issues shape the informational issues of the gospel for each context. The event of the cross establishes the vision of the kingdom of God. This vision, in like manner, establishes the interpretive key for the meaning of the cross in each context.

If the gospel is communicated in the context of relationships where promise keeping characterizes the relationship, then the Lao will most likely interpret the gospel

message as a narrative that connects with household relationships. This will place Christian witness within the framework of the morality of the household established by mothers and, to a lesser degree, by village monks. If, on the other hand, the gospel is communicated in ways that emphasize recruitment to a new *müang* power where allegiance to doctrine and church hierarchy is emphasized over relationship, then the Lao will tend to associate the gospel with the amoral force of a powerful foreign religion. This will characterize the Christian community as a *müang* power that is not integrated into the larger *müang* system of Laos. To the extent that this is true in the Lao PDR, the persecution of the church comes as no surprise.

Below, I address how communication can engage the social structure of the Lao in ways that allow the intention of the gospel to be understood. This discussion charts a course by which missionaries can speak within Lao relationships. It deals first with communication within the social structure of grid and group, then it considers three levels of social engagement with the gospel. Finally, it considers how communicating the intention of covenant within the social structure will facilitate the experience of the power of the gospel in the lives of those who believe.

Communicating with Respect for the Group

While acknowledging the unique individualism of Lao society, I have attempted to show that the dominant issue among the Lao (especially in the village) is the interdependence of the social group. Individuals have freedom to choose their own paths as long as they act in ways that benefit the well-being of the group. The influence of the group is strongest at the level of the household, where maternal kinship ties and

obligation are strongest. Consequently, the first strategy is to communicate the gospel in ways that show respect for the household, and seeks the well-being of its members.

This strategy stands in opposition to the large majority of Christian communicational strategies in Laos that have focused on calling individuals out of their social structures and into the isolated community of the church. The Lao church exists as a sub-culture that Lao society understands to be allied with foreign religious and political power. The strategy of communicating within the social group needs to be considered in terms of witness to non-Christians in the household, and in terms of welcoming non-Christians into the local church.

People who remain un-integrated in Lao society are not only dangerous, but are often blamed for the troubles experienced by the group. Truth is not the issue of concern in communication within the group. The concern is with allegiance for the sake of the group. Issues of truth are always dealt with in light of the needs and safety of the household group. The only real option for those who disagree with the ideology of the group is to work in silence or to abandon the social structure altogether, which is an unrealistic option for most people[5] due to social, economic, and political vulnerability.

If it is assumed that the gospel will critique the worldview of Lao society, how can this be communicated from within the group? To answer this question it is important to first realize the importance of non-verbal communication in Lao society. This is particularly true at the household level, where it is not enough to simply to give lip

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[5] It is true that many Lao Christians have opted out but they are enabled to do this only by the presence of foreign financial support. Even this support does not always save them from state-sponsored persecution.

service to respect for those who are older; a person must demonstrate this respect ritually, and by serving those who are older. These outward expressions of respect can communicate the intention of the gospel.

Communication of the gospel within the social group will first take the form of social relationships that have been transformed by the ethic of the kingdom of God. In the Lao context, this means living on behalf of others in ways that recall the moral power of mothers and monks. Here the utopian vision of the Lao, captured in the word *khwaamsuk*, overlaps with the vision of the kingdom of God.

Christians must seek the well-being of the group by living on behalf of others. This can be done through serving others and showing ritual respect to others (e.g., blessing elders at New Year's and performing the *sommaa* ritual).[6] In this way the non-verbal message of the gospel will normally be acceptable because it will affirm the group in the most morally powerful ways. There will be a sense in which Christian lives will affirm the group, even beyond the normal social requirement. Of course the worldview of the non-Christian Lao will lead them to conclude that the intention of this kind of communication within the group is to address and affirm the traditional moral quality of mothers and monks. This highlights the need for non-verbal communication to be complemented by verbal communication. I will have more to say later about ritual as a non-verbal strategy.

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[6] The *sommaa* ritual is performed for parents and/or elders. In this ritual, younger people bow and ask for forgiveness for any offenses that have been committed by the younger people in the relationship. The parents or elders ritually forgive the offenses and renew the relationship.

Communicating the gospel within the group also implies that Christian witness will address the whole household and not disenfranchised individuals from a household. Very often, young Lao people have converted to Christianity as individuals without the consent or input of their households. While it can be acknowledged that removing an individual for a time from his or her normal social grouping often opens them up to new ideas and ways of living, the failure to take into account the household group often results in a short-lived faith. The pattern in such cases has been for households to ostracize, persecute, or even abandon these young converts. At the age of marriage many of these young converts marry other Christians who are also cut off from their parents and household network, or they leave their Christian faith to return to the household's care and provision. While the household unit should be the main focus, special attention should be given to the heads of the household.

Pastors Nantachai and Ubolwan Mejudhon have modeled a household approach in Bangkok, Thailand, where the social context is similar to that of Laos. Upon meeting a young person who is interested in the gospel, they ask for an opportunity to be introduced to their family members in the household, especially the parents and elders of the home. At this meeting the pastors go out of their way to recognize the authority of the household structure in the young person's life while explaining who they are. They also make sure that what the young person hears is the same as what all the members of the household have an opportunity to hear. Furthermore, they are careful not to dominate the time of young converts with church activities, but instead they instruct these new converts to take every opportunity to fulfill their obligations within the household. If a time comes when the new convert is ready to be baptized, the church then invites the young person's family

to the service to participate in the service by presenting the newly-baptized Christian with his or her first Bible (N. Mejudhon and U. Mejudhon 2000).

Christians who continue to live under the obligations to and care of the household, and who bring the ethic of the kingdom into the social relations of the household, will gain two things. First, they will gain the respect of other household members because of the moral power they display. Second, in many cases they will be given social space (freedom) to practice their faith, as long as they do not threaten the well-being of the household and continue to acknowledge its authority in their lives.

The key issue in the judgment made by the household group is the overall well-being of all its members moving freely, but within the larger framework of the village and the nation. This freedom is key to the communication of the gospel in Lao society. By showing respect ritually and by serving members of the household group, Christians can earn the right to communicate the gospel within the bounds of their household. This same freedom will allow Christians to take up identifiable roles within the household, but still perform them in ways that critique and expand the worldview themes bound up in the cosmology of hierarchy (see Kraft 1996:326). These relationships will be considered in terms of the dynamics of Lao interpersonal relationships below.

A second angle on the strategy of communicating within the group becomes discernable when considering the communication of the local church as witness. Just as there is a high group and hierarchical orientation in Lao society, this is also generally true in local Lao churches. In fact, the local Christian community is a somewhat closed subculture within the larger society. By contrast, the kingdom of God ethic revealed in

the gospel calls Christians to be group oriented but without forgetting their interdependence and common spiritual history with non-Christians (1 Pe. 2:10).

Christian communication of the gospel needs to be characterized by hospitality. This should be a hospitality that works toward the integration of every non-Christian who attends the local church. Lao villagers traditionally deal with the danger they feel from outsiders by encouraging outsiders to come in and take a role as insiders. Christians should do the same, by finding ways to include non-Christians in their worship.

Societies that are high group want to protect their boundaries. The gospel curbs this tendency. The boundaries of the local church need to be porous. Non-Christians should be invited to read the Scriptures, lead the singing, and assist in the preparations for common meals. Non-Christians should be invited to recognize the presence of Jesus and to partake of the Lord's supper.[7]

The model for local churches should be derived from the social structure of the Lao household. The kinship relationships, the sense of moral obligation to one another, and the priority for the well-being of the kin group are all appropriate models for relationships in local churches. Institutional models of the church that reflect hierarchy and relationships of authority without kinship relations will recall the amoral use of power at the *müang* level of society. In cases were local churches are plagued by competition for control of foreign resources, they are already reflecting *müang* power.

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[7] The teaching of Jesus in Matthew 13:26-29 suggests that the church should not be concerned with sorting out who are the real believers. This task seems to be one that Christ will accomplish upon his return.

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Communicating the gospel within the group structure of Lao society also suggests the possibility of a "churchless" model of Christianity. Herbert Hoefer has made an argument for this model in the Hindu society of India (1991). He shares the advice he received from a Brahmin believer in Christ whose ministry is to visit the *Jesu Bhaktas* (believers in Jesus who remain part of the Hindu community):

> His first advice is, "If anyone asks, tell them you are a Hindu. It is acceptable to worship the god of your choice as a Hindu." The statement also indicates that you have identified yourself with the culture, history, traditions, and cause of the nation. Secondly, he advises Jesu Bhaktas never to go to a church. He warns that they will usually come after you immediately, embarrassing both you and your family. This will cause unnecessary misunderstanding and opposition with your family. Thirdly, he advises avoiding going into full-time "church work." Rather, one should stay within one's family and fulfill one's social responsibilities. One's primary call and opportunity is to be a witness there (Hoefer 1999:37).

How important is membership in an institutional church to the Christian faith? While it is difficult to deny the benefits of the institutional church to the faith, history shows us that time and time again the faith has had to be renewed and extended by going outside of its walls. A Christian community that did not abandon Lao society would not only be more socially acceptable, it would also be more theologically dynamic and better able to communicate the gospel effectively. The shape of this kind of Christian community is more likely to appear outside of the current institutional Lao church.[8]

Communicating within the Hierarchy

Christians should communicate the gospel within the social hierarchy of Lao society. This strategy requires structuring communication to flow in terms of male and

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[8] See Del Birkey for an excellent overview of the house church model (1988).

female groupings and older-to-younger relationships, and through the performance of ritual.

Male and Female Communication

Communication will be best between people of the same gender, in recognition of the male-female classification of behavior in Lao social relations. This is probably a good practice around the world, but it is stressed in the social context of Laos to a larger degree than in some other societies. It is especially true with married adults, since friendships are strongest between married women-to-women and between married men-to-men. Unmarried young men and women, on the other hand, are often found socializing together in groups. Communication can flow from an unmarried male to an unmarried female as long as it is done in a group setting. A man and woman are never allowed to speak alone, unless it is public knowledge that they intend to be married.

Patron-Client Communication

Communication will be best when it flows within the structure of older-to-younger relationships. Missionaries will need to be concerned not only for the communication of information, but also for the social obligations involved in the communicational relationship. For the most part, Christian witness should flow from the older one in the relationship to the younger one. Older communicators will need to be aware of living up to the social responsibility to provide advice and security for those who are younger. They should not be surprised when people younger themselves with whom they have a relationship tend to convert rather quickly. But neither should they be surprised if these younger converts abandon the faith just as quickly, should the older one

in the relationship not provide the kind of care expected of them. For foreign missionaries this creates a problem of establishing expectations which they are not willing or able to fulfill in the long term.

One strategy that foreign missionaries can use is to connect converts to Lao Christian "older brothers and sisters" within the household of faith (the local church) who can live up to these expectations of care. Another, more critical strategy, however, is to provide advice that teaches the younger one to look to God as the "older one" who can provide for all his or her needs. At the same time, converts should be instructed to continue to give their allegiance to the households to which they belong. Living up to their obligations in the household is important because: 1) the Scriptures teach us to honor our fathers and mothers so that things will go well with us (Eph. 6:2); 2) it can be a means to avoid being persecuted for the wrong reasons; and 3) it can be a means of winning opportunities for further Christian witness.

Christian witness that flows from the younger one in a relationship to the older one is not impossible. U. Mejudhon shares a strategy for younger people in a relationship to engage their older brother or sister in witness through meekness (1997). Witness in this context requires time and even more careful attention to fulfilling social obligations.[9] In this same context, witness begins by demonstrating obedience and loyalty. It requires that witness be provided primarily in non-verbal and non-confrontational formats. Older people in a relationship know better than younger people, especially in the area of

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[9] I was personally involved in witnessing to a Lao couple biologically older than myself and higher in social status. I began my relationship with the couple in 1990, and although I worked closely with them nearly everyday, it was not until 2001 that they were finally baptized.

religious knowledge. It may be that the older one in the relationship will counsel the younger one to abandon his or her Christian faith for the traditional religious rituals of the Lao. In these cases, polemic refusals will be unproductive. Younger Christians will need to carefully discern in which parts and at which level of the ritual system they can participate. Participation in the ritual system at some level, if only a low level, and coupled with apologies and extra efforts in fulfilling other obligations, will often win tolerance of the new faith. This is especially true if the younger party shows loyalty in spite of receiving only small returns from the relationship. Some level of ritual participation remains vital to this context, because it demonstrates respect and honor for those involved.

Ritual Communication

Communication will be best when ritual shapes the media of communication. The hierarchy within Lao relationships gives ritual a pivotal place in the maintenance and transformation of relationships. Here again it is possible to see that communication in Laos is often more concerned with how something, is said than with what is said. Speeches generally follow an expected pattern. Meetings open and close with the same ritual words every time. Even humor follows a strictly prescribed structure. Formalized communication is a means of reinforcing the group and integrating people into the group. It assigns each person a clear role, and with the role a sense of security. The communication of the gospel will need to be done in terms of ritualized language, whether it is shaped as storytelling, or as ritual manipulation of symbolic objects and done with stylized speech.

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Christians will need to consider carefully when traditional rituals can be used, when they can be used in altered form, and when there is a need to create new rituals. One instance of the adoption of a traditional Lao ritual into the Christian communication of the gospel is in the LEC's use of the *sommaa* ritual.[10] However, it is of note that the LEC has not seen fit to make use of any *khwan* rituals.

One of the most stressful experiences for converts to Christianity in Laos is when they are asked to participate in *khwan* or Buddhist rituals. Protestant Christians are consistently instructed not to participate in traditional rituals at any level. At a spiritual level this can be seen as a way of clearly marking the beginning of their allegiance to Christ and the end of their allegiance to the spiritual realities behind traditional Lao rituals. On a social level, the lack of participation in non-Christian rituals helps to define the borders of the Christian sub-culture. Given the vulnerability of the church in Laos, this is naturally important to Christians.

As stated above, failing to participate in traditional Lao rituals communicates that a person has chosen to leave the social group. Not participating in Lao rituals communicates that a person no longer feels obligated to the group. Many Christians obey the instruction of the Protestant churches, and end up cutting themselves off or seriously straining their household relationships. Other Christians find the prospect of social death more than they can bear and consequently participate--unprepared--in the ritual life of the household. Afterwards, they feel a good deal of remorse and they are careful not to let

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[10] The *sommaa* ritual is normally done by children for parents to ask forgiveness for any offenses they have committed against their parents. It is often done in traditional Lao weddings and has been incorporated into Lao Protestant Christian weddings. Unfortunately, it is about the only part of the wedding service that uses traditional Lao ritual.

other Christians know about their participation. Another group of Lao Christians is experimenting with ways to participate in household rituals in ways that satisfy social obligations while still identifying themselves as Christians. Christians need to prayerfully discern how to participate in traditional rituals in ways that demonstrate the proper respect to the structure of the household, village, and nation, while communicating their primary allegiance to Jesus Christ.

A key to participation is the ability to identify roles in the ritual performance that allow Christians to meaningfully participate and identify themselves as Christians. For example, when a Christian's non-Christian brother is being ordained as a monk, to completely refuse to participate will create a serious conflict. A young man's ordination is a rite of passage to full adulthood. Men are referred to as *dib* "raw" before they are ordained as monks and, afterwards receive titles (e.g., *Tit*), depending upon the level of ordination they attain before they de-robe and return to secular life. According to some Lao Christians, the very lowest level of participation--but an appropriate one--would be to assist with the cost of the ceremony and the preparation for the feast and to attend the ritual as an observer.

Attendance at *khwan* rituals can be done in a similar way. In my own experiments in this regard, I have found that there are normally ways to participate and still be identified as a Christian. For instance, at the end of a *khwan* ritual, everyone is given an opportunity to verbally bless the recipient. I do this with a short Christian prayer of blessing in Jesus' name while I tie cotton string around the person's wrist. This communicates the intention to respect and bless the individual and his or her household,

thereby establishing a solid basis for relationship. At the same time it identifies me as a Christian.

Low-level participation in traditional Lao rituals raises the issue of spiritual power and dual allegiance. Given the context of the centrality of social relations, I believe that Christians can and should participate in Lao rituals in low-level ways as a means of providing a witness to the gospel. At the same time, however, Christians should not participate in religious rituals without careful consideration of the spiritual powers involved.[11] It should also be remembered that the power of Christ is stronger than any spiritual power that may be present, and that the power of Christ, exercised on earth through reliance on the Father and the Holy Spirit, is available to his disciples (Lk. 10:19). Hiebert writes, "we must avoid two extremes: a denial of the reality of Satan and the spiritual battle within and around us in which we are engaged and an undue fascination with, and fear of, Satan and his hosts" (1994:214).

In summary, there are two central issues involved here regarding ritual participation at a low level. First, prayer for spiritual protection and discernment should precede and accompany any participation in traditional Lao religious rituals. Second, believers should be firm in their faith in the presence and power of Christ for the situation. Without this kind of faith Christians would do better to refrain from participation.

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[11] See Kraft's chapter on "Elements of Ministry" in *Christianity with Power* (1989:147-163) for helpful guidance in power oriented ministry.

Communicating for Encounter at Three Levels

I have argued that Christian witness among Lao people should be done from within the group and within the internal structure of Lao relationships, at the center of which is a focus on the importance of relationships in Lao society and a corresponding reading of the gospel as covenant in the Lao social context. The highlighting of covenant has as its focus the relationship between humans and God the Creator, and among humans as neighbors. The Old Testament idea of covenant as legal contract is replaced by the New Testament idea of covenant as promise.[12]

Christian witness in Laos must have as its goal the encounter between Lao people and Jesus Christ. Communicating for encounter with Christ requires Christian social engagement. In this section I propose a model of communication that will seek this encounter at the three levels suggested by Kraft (1999).

Table 28 shows the different orientations of communication when applied to each of Kraft's levels of encounter, with reference to households and *müang* power. Today the communication of the gospel by Christians in Laos may be more associated with *müang* power in the minds of non-Christians. The use of the Buddhist word *vinnyan* in the Christian community for "spirit" and "Holy Spirit" associates the faith with Buddhism's concern for the life after death (the ancestors) and its role in legitimizing political and economic power. This is not to say that local Protestant churches never address issues of everyday life; they do. It is to argue rather that their primary orientation is toward the

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[12] In saying this I recognize that the Old Testament idea of covenant can also be interpreted as one of promise. I am referring here to the way Old Testament Israel often reads the covenant as contract or law.

issues of life after death. This argument is made stronger by the fact that the fundamental

belief in *khwan* (life spirit) is rarely addressed in the Lao church.

TABLE 28

COMMUNICATION WITHIN LAO SOCIETY

	SOCIAL-CULTURAL ORIENTATIONS	
Social Level	Village/Households (Kinship networks)	*Müang* Powers/Buddhism (Powers larger than the village)
Social Dimension	Importance of the group Communal	Hierarchy Individualism
Gender Orientation	Female (Male)	Male (Female)
	CHRISTIAN WITNESS ORIENTATIONS	
Social Orientation	Within the Household of Faith Older to younger kin relationships	Ritual *Müang* Relationships Ritual relationships
Media for Communicating Relationship	Covenant Fulfilling obligation to care for members of the group	Gift exchange Negotiated relationships that provide what I need
Media for Communicating Power	Household rituals Prayer, blessing, exorcism and acts of compassion Power of family relations	Institutional church Life-after-death issues Power of ritual
Media for Communicating the Word	Focus on story	Focus on Preaching/Teaching

Effective Christian communication will associate the gospel primarily with the

life issues of the household (and *khwan*). In the household context, covenant relationships

will come into primary focus. Because there is less hierarchy in household relationships,

Christians should emphasize storytelling over preaching as a way of helping people

experience the truth regarding God. Storytelling is an important way of relating the Word to everyday problems and relationships.

The on-going persecution of Christians by the government of the Lao PDR makes it clear that the institutional church is perceived as a serious threat to the *müang* power of the state. Christian communities that identify with the household, while showing respect for the larger social system, may fare better. U. Mejudhon's call for meekness to characterize Christian engagement is important here. Lao Christian faith needs to take a stance of weakness associated with women, households, monks, and younger relations. This weaker orientation may find more social space within the larger *müang* system than that which the present institutional church finds today.[13]

Relational Encounter for Allegiance

The first level of encounter that Kraft calls for is a relational encounter. He writes the following in this regard:

> God started with a Covenant, not with a book of doctrine. And Jesus came that the world might be saved through relationship, not through theology, as important as it is to think biblically. Theology, then, is intended to serve relationship. . . . Contextualization of relationship, then, has to become a major focus of our teaching, writing and witnessing. *We need to learn what the contextualization of relationships is all about* (italics mine, Kraft 1999:8).

Christian witness should have the primary goal of an encounter between Lao people and the person of Jesus Christ. Very often missionary engagement with Lao people has started with confrontation over truth issues. This confrontation proceeds from a felt need on the part of many missionaries to declare the truth that Jesus is the only way

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[13] The government's perception of the Lao Church as a rival power is strengthened by the financial and social ties that the Lao Christian community has with foreign Christian organizations.

to reach the Father, to people who have no foundational religious concept of an all powerful, Creator God. Verbal proclamation of doctrine is the wrong place to begin engagement in Lao society.

The hierarchical cosmology of Lao society largely equates society with the sacred. Lao people are able to move seamlessly from social relationships to spiritual relationships. As I have also argued, the acceptance of information is determined far more by the quality of relationships than it is by the content of the information. Furthermore, the vulnerability of Lao identity makes it vital for each person to be allied to powers that can address the life issues of the group (well-being, *khwaamsuk*).

For many Lao people, Christianity is appealing when it can be seen to address the concrete needs in their lives, and if they feel that Christians can be counted on in times of need. The first step in communicating the gospel relationally is to make and keep promises (covenant) with non-Christian people. These promises should be made and kept between people in older-to-younger relationships within the overall context of the household relationships. They require Christians to seek the "welfare" (*khwaamsuk)* envisioned by the kingdom of God for those with whom they create a covenant.

Seeking the welfare of others within the social structure of Laos can, of course, take on many forms. It can take the shape of simple individual acts of kindness, or it may take the shape of a Christian community development program. Whatever shape seeking the welfare of others takes, the best communication will take place within the context of fulfilling the obligations of older-to-younger relationships.

The morality associated with the selfless life of a mother and the kinship loyalties of the household should characterize the gatherings of God's people (the local church).

Household morality reconfigured as kingdom of God ethics should call missionaries and local Christians to extend promise keeping, typically reserved for biological kin, to everyone they engage, both inside and outside of the Christian group. Again, there is always a call for an emphasis on hospitality.

Promise keeping within the social structure of Lao relations will be a powerful means of communicating the gospel. But Christians are limited in this effort in that their relationship with Christ is primary. Some people may seek to take advantage of Christian kindness. This is only natural (Mt. 5:39-41). Some (especially those seeking amoral power over the morality of real relationship), will be disappointed that all their needs have not been met. Establishing relationship with non-Christians and introducing them to a relationship with Jesus will also require encounters at the level of power and truth.

Power Encounter

The preoccupation in Lao society with spiritual realities is a direct response to poverty and absence of power in the lives of most Lao people. The struggle to gain some control over life circumstances is sometimes so extreme that the Lao at times resort to the use of amoral-utilitarian ways of relating to others to get what they need.

At one level Christians can provide the most significant power encounter of all, through making and keeping covenant with non-Christians. But living the ethic of the kingdom of God in covenant relationships with Lao people also requires a level of spiritual empowerment that proceeds from the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. The power of Christ in the life of the believer is tied directly to the

believer's own encounter with Christ in covenant. Kraft writes the following in this regard:

> Evangelicals have almost completely ignored, and seldom worked to contextualize [spiritual power encounter]. . . . Jesus, though totally relational, also concerned Himself with whether or not people were free . . . Jesus dealt with [the devastation brought about by our enemy Satan] by using the power and authority given Him by God the Father to bring freedom. And he initiated His disciples (in a relational way) into the use of that power and authority. He also taught them that down through the ages, "whoever has faith in Me will do what I do"--that is, will work in that same power and authority (Jn. 14:12) (1999:9-10).

Kraft argues that Jesus used this power and authority in two ways. First, he used it "to destroy the works of the enemy" (1 Jn. 3:8). Second, he used it to "express the love of God in very tangible ways." The most tangible result of the use of Jesus' power and authority is the experience of freedom (1999:10). Spiritual power is a daily reality in the life of a non-Christian Lao person. In the same way, God is demonstrating his presence through displays of power to meet the needs of his people in the Lao church. Healings, daily provision, spiritual deliverance from Satanic powers, and freedom from addictions mark the turning point to God for many, many Lao Christians.

The "ritual knowledge" of the people of God includes the authority to pray in Jesus' name on behalf of those who are oppressed physically, economically, socially, politically, and spiritually. In my travels throughout Laos I have often asked non-believers if they would like me to pray for their problem. I have never had anyone refuse. There is a real sense in which much of Lao religious ritual is a search for power, more than an act of allegiance. A key point of witness in Laos is to exercise the authority of

the believer to access the power of God in Jesus' name to set people free from oppression.[14]

Perhaps just as important are the blessings that Christians can bestow on non-Christians. In traditional societies where the cosmology is hierarchical, the speaking of blessing is common and highly valued. Christians should bless others in the name of Christ at every opportunity, as a sign of the arrival of Christ and his kingdom (Lk. 10). Because meaning in Laos is valued more when it is externalized, Christians should generally lay hands on those they bless as an external tangible sign of the blessing being bestowed. Men should generally bless only men, and women should generally bless only women. If a man does bless a woman, he should hold his hand up and outward toward the woman without touching her. Some Christians on occasion use the tying of *khwan* strings to indicate God's blessing upon others. Prayerful stanzas from the Book of Psalms should be written on cards and read aloud when giving gifts at New Year's time and at weddings.

It should not surprise us to find that non-Christians and Christians will respond better to the exercise of God's power in the name of Jesus Christ when our prayers and actions are ritually formulated. This is not magic. It is a form of communicating the power of God to give freedom in a medium that is understandable and acceptable within the Lao cosmology.[15]

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[14] I include in my reference to prayer the speaking with authority called for by Kraft (1989:149).

[15] Robert Priest has argued that some forms of power ministry show signs of homeopathic and contagious magic (1995:13), but in the same article he concedes that communication is impossible without the presence of both metaphor and metonym (1995:57). Since metaphor is a kind of homeopathic communication and metonym a kind of contagion, Priest seems to refute his own argument.

Similar to the story of Simon the healer (Ac. 8), some Lao will be interested in experiencing and obtaining power without fulfilling the obligations of covenant that come with that power. As I have argued, this tendency is strongest when social relationships are associated with *müang* power. So, Christians should associate their use of power ministries with the moral kinship obligation of the household.

While people may experience the powerful intervention of God in their lives, what they most need is a personal relationship with Christ, based on promise keeping and able to transform their household relationships. The distinctions between power for selfish purposes and power for covenant keeping can be communicated non-verbally. Living in the context of communist Laos may require that the greater portion of Christian witness be non-verbal. But at some point, and especially in the household setting, the gospel will also need to be verbally communicated by narrating the biblical stories.

Encounter with the "Word"

The third encounter that Kraft calls for is an experience with the truth of the gospel (1999:14). While this level involves information, there is also the concern with how people experience truth relationally, and not simply how they acknowledge doctrine. As should be clear by now, the reference to truth reveals a preoccupation with standardization of understanding. In place of the word "truth," I suggest that we use Word to indicate the biblical narrative of the gospel in which Christian faith lives. What seems to be more important than accuracy of doctrine is the experience with knowing the truth that Jesus is Lord. This knowledge has been and should continue to be handed down through the biblical narrative. The knowledge in this case is not a direct transfer from

text to understanding, rather, it comes to people as they hear the story and read it themselves. Storytelling will allow Lao people to most accurately relate the gospel to their situation since stories invite listeners to participate in ways that doctrine cannot.

Craig Van Gelder writes the following in regard to a narrative approach to the Bible:

> The natural use of Scripture, as Lindbeck suggests, is imaginative and behavioral as well as cognitive. The purpose of a narrative approach to the Bible and theological understanding means that *we must move from ideology to engagement*, from objective principles to reflective participation, and from cultural Christianity to alternative Christian community, as Schneiders has pointed out. In carrying out a narrative approach, our task is threefold: (1) to reenter the biblical story on its own terms, (2) to listen to this story through the historic interpretation of the Christian tradition, and (3) to let this story and reinterpretation shape or reshape our own story (italics mine, 1996:38).[16]

In the Buddhist temple community and in government schools, the transfer of information is normally done by lecture and memorization. The ability to recite information is generally valued over the ability to synthesize information and to relate it well to others. In a similar way the institutional Lao church places a high value on preaching and the memorization of Scripture. In both cases, to recite the teachings is to acknowledge your allegiance to them and to empower that allegiance in a person's life.

In the household, information is transferred through mentoring, dialogue, and storytelling. Storytelling and dialogue with extended kin often goes on for long hours into the evening. Christian witness will most effectively lead to an encounter with Jesus when

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[16] The second point concerning our need to listen to the biblical stories through the historic interpretation of the Christian tradition is a good one, but needs some qualification. Many people around the world experience their faith and read the Scriptures with little or no knowledge of the historical interpretations of church. I do not believe that this disqualifies their interpretations. On the other hand, dialogue with other church communities' readings of the biblical narrative, present and past, will enrich a local community's understanding.

it is done through telling the stories of the Bible. This in turn may result in the formal memorization of these stories for use in instructing others in the faith, and for ritually signaling a person's allegiance to Christ and the Christian community of faith.

Keeping Covenant

I have suggested that the gospel should be communicated within a relational context shaped after the kinship relations of the Lao household. This should be done within the hierarchical structure of Lao society, in households, villages, and the *müang* level of Lao society. Christian communication of the gospel must engage the Lao in terms of their relationships, spiritual power, and understanding of the Word.

The three dimensions of encounter in terms of relationship, power, and experience with the Word (knowledge) are mutually interdependent. As shown below in Figure 16, the three come together in the act of making and keeping covenant, or to put it in less religious terminology, in the act of making and keeping promises.

In making a promise, a person performs an action even as he or she speaks. Making a promise changes a relationship. So does breaking a promise. The gospel is about the cross of Jesus Christ, God living and dying on behalf of humans, not at our request but at God's own initiative and love. This is the definitive movement of God toward humanity, and it establishes the normative structure for all human relationships. To say that humans are social beings is to say that we were made to make and keep promises. God has shown us how to do this, and empowers us to follow his model in the cross of Jesus Christ. In this sense, communicating the gospel among the Lao is to enact Christian discipleship: a discipleship that casts a vision of the kingdom ethic; an ethic that

reflects the glory of Christ crucified and resurrected; a life lived on behalf of others. Keeping covenant in community must be done with the expectation and celebration of the coming of well-being (*khwaamsuk*) in the kingdom of God.
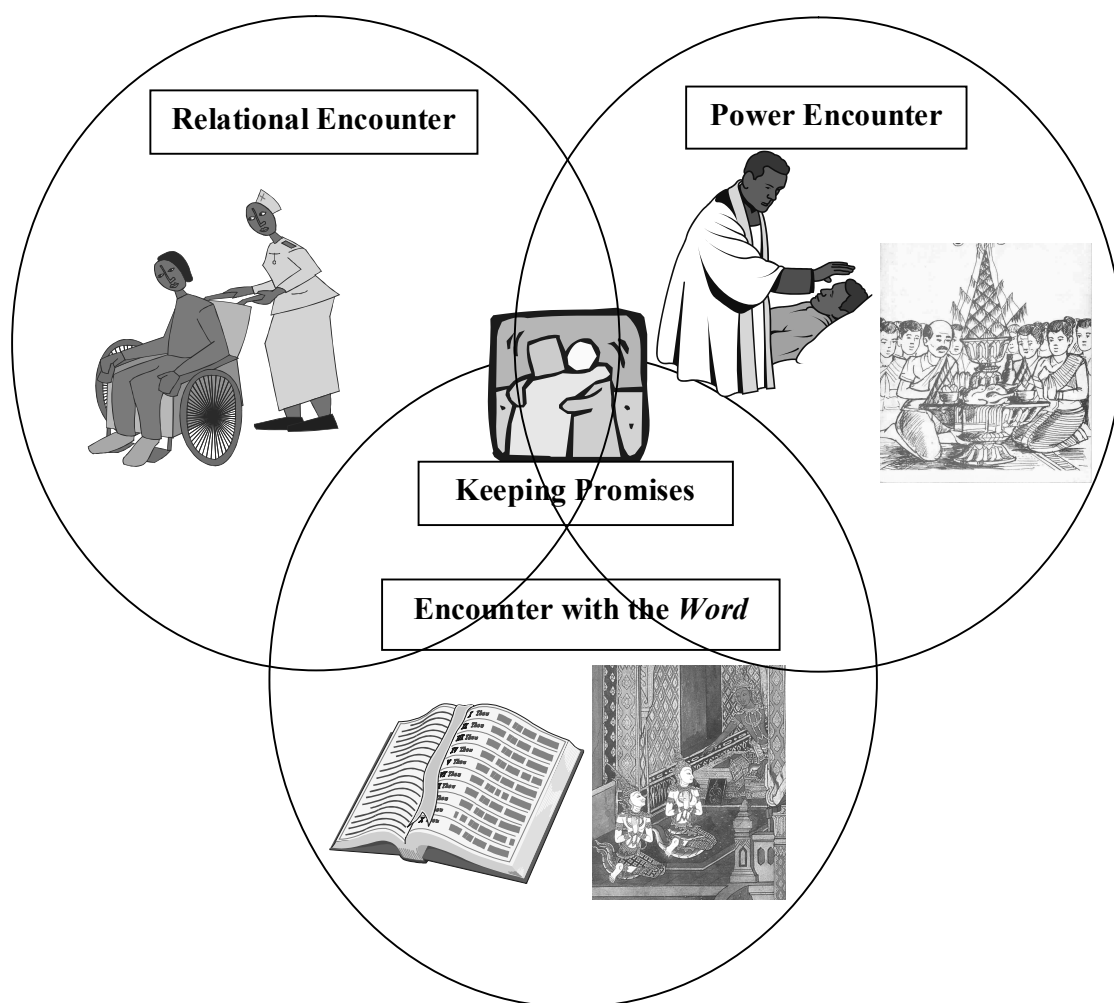
FIGURE 16

THREE ENCOUNTERS IN CHRISTIAN WITNESS

When people keep covenant God blesses them as a community, and that impacts every single individual on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level. The relationships in Lao society that best reflect covenant relationships occur at the level of the household,where mothers are the primary symbol of moral power. Covenant with God and others through allegiance to Jesus will be communicated best when Christians are integrated and loyal to the group and related to each other in terms of older-to-younger relationships. But the communication of the gospel must also be marked by power, a power that is steeped in the social structure and ritual of society, but that also casts a vision of the kingdom ethic that can critique and expand the story of what it means to be Lao. As a Christian I want to communicate the Word of God to Lao people. At the same time, I must realize that the power of that Word does not lie in articulated words. The power of the sacred surpasses speech and touches the symbols that people use to configure the cosmos (Ricoeur 1995a:53). This configuration speaks to us about our social relations.

Summary of Strategies

I have suggested the following strategies for communicating the gospel to the lowland Lao in Laos:

1. Communicate the gospel in ways that show respect for the community and seek the well-being of its members.
   a. Truth information is not the primary concern of Lao people.
   b. The primary concern of Lao people is with allegiance to the group in order to secure the well-being of its members.

    c. Christian witness should make use of non-verbal forms of communication.

    d. Christians must mark their relationships with others by living on behalf of others (service).

    e. Communicate the gospel to the whole household, not only to disenfranchised individuals.

    f. Christians must ritually show respect for the group and fulfill their obligations to the group in order to earn the right to communicate the gospel within the bounds of the household.

    g. Christian witness should be characterized by hospitality.

       i. Integrate non-Christians into the worship of the local church.

      ii. Invite non-Christians to recognize the Body of the Lord Jesus and to participate in the Lord's Supper.

    h. The model for local churches should be derived from the social structure of the Lao household.

    i. Communicating the gospel within the group structure of Lao society also suggests the possibility of a "churchless" model of Christianity.

2. Christians should communicate the gospel within the hierarchy that structures Lao relationships as a patron-client model.

    a. Communication will be best between people of the same gender.

    b. Communication will be best when it flows within the structure of older-to-younger relationships.

    c. Communication will be best when ritual shapes the media of communication.

    i. How something is said is often more important than what is said.

    ii. Christians should find a way to participate in Lao rituals at some appropriate level.

    iii. Christians need to prayerfully discern and deal with the issue of spiritual power when participating in Lao rituals.

3. The gospel should be communicated in ways that associate it with the moral power of the household and impact the Lao at three levels.

    a. Relationship/Allegiance

       i. Making and keeping promises

       ii. Associating Christian communication with the morality of the household

    b. Power Encounter

       i. The interest in power among the Lao is directly tied to their experience with poverty.

       ii. The power of Christ in the life of the believer should be tied to the believer's covenant relationship with Christ.

       iii. Healing and deliverance ministries should lead to freedom.

       iv. Blessings should be used as a means of communicating Christ's power.

       v. Prayers and worship should often be in ritual form.

    c. Encounter with the Word

       i. Storytelling will allow Lao people to relate the gospel to their situation.

       ii. Storytelling is a communicational form that is associated with the household.

      iii. Preaching and teaching are forms of communication associated with the Buddhism and government education (*müang* power).

4. The gospel is about covenant, and must be communicated relationally.

    a. Making and keeping promises

    b. Celebrating the blessing of God on our community and the coming *khwaamsuk* (Hebrew *shalom*) in the kingdom of God.

Unresolved Issues

There are three issues that have emerged in the process of my research that I must leave unresolved. First, the trail that this study has taken has ended at the door of a model of communication that addresses household relationships. Assuming that Lao people choose to enter into covenant with Jesus, what shape should the Church then take? I have pointed to the (institutionally) churchless model practiced in some places in India. A house church model could also be considered. It is not within the parameters of this study to pursue which model of the church should emerge, but I would assume that the answer lies with Lao Christians themselves, and not with missionaries. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned from China and India for application to the Lao context.

Second, the context of Christian witness in Laos is one of persecution. For more than six years this persecution has been increasing in intensity. There are theological and social issues related to this context that require more consideration. The role of suffering in witness should be looked at both from a theological and social point of view. The role of foreign missionaries as tentmakers in this context also needs more careful reflection.

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What does the gospel require of them in this situation? This is a question that needs serious discussion if the intention of Christian witness is to be properly understood.

Finally, I am left with a desire to explore further the relationships between social relations and the kingdom of God on one side, and ritual power and myth on the other. Douglas has reconfigured Durkheim's belief that religion is empowered by "the moral ascendancy of society over its members" (Durkheim 1979:35). I want to explore if this idea can be constructive for Christian theology. What if Durkheim's idea is correct but incomplete? Perhaps the moral ascendancy of society over the individual was meant to reflect in turn a morality higher still, one that belongs to the kingdom of God, established on the cross by Jesus Christ? If God intended us to live in the covenant relationships reflected in his kingdom, perhaps Durkheim's idea is not antithetical to Christian faith. Perhaps, by following Ricoeur's view, a social approach to Christian faith can be understood in a way that calls society to keep covenant relationships that result in religion that pleases God.

The relationship between myth and ritual is an old problem. Ricoeur has suggested that it is impossible to separate the prophetic word of religion from the experience of sacred power without reducing religion to a powerless, cerebral experience (1995a:67). In spite of the long conflict between those who call for sacred ritual and those who favor the prophetic/ethical word, we cannot separate them without the risk of emptying religion of its power to re-create our inner and social worlds. It is not enough for the Lao to simply speak words of comfort to an unfortunate person, or to only speak words of congratulations to a fortunate one. The community must be gathered to enact encouragement and congratulations by linking the person's situation to the cosmos,

through calling and tying the *khwan* with white cotton string around the wrist. How does this connection with the cosmos and the sacred empower our pursuit of the ethical life?

Perhaps the mystery of the connections between the dynamics of social relations, the kingdom of God, the prophetic word, and ritual cannot be unraveled. Whether or not they can, I am convinced that the presence of God can only be experienced in a community that declares his Word and receives his power. As Ricoeur points out, this is the central affirmation of the prologue to John's Gospel: "The Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us. We have seen His glory" (Jn. 1:14) (Ricoeur 1995a:65).

If the social body is embodied in the rituals that call the *khwan,* Christians would do well to pay attention to how Lao people experience the sacred and what this says about the shape of covenant relationships. It is along this path that the Lao will discern the intention of the gospel. Then Christ will dwell in their hearts and *khwan* will no longer be called, for the kingdom of God will have begun to appear in their midst as *khwaamsuk* (*shalom*).

CONTENTS OF APPENDIXES

Appendices A through G show in graphic bar form a summary of some of the data collected from the questionnaire on *khwan* rituals. Appendix A shows data that reveals the biographical profile of the sixty Lao who answered the questionnaire. It considers religious affiliation, place of birth, age, ability to read Thai (which is an indication of living near the Thai border and of urbanization) and level of formal education. Appendix B shows the responses that indicate the meaning of *khwan* and *khwan* rituals for the respondents. Appendixes C and D provide the number of times that each *khwan* ritual was identified. This data may reveal what are the most common *khwan* rituals performed, or at least the ones that are most commonly associated with this ritual system. Appendices E, F, and G show the data in the same categories as Appendices A, B, C, and D. The difference in these three appendices is that they compare the responses of those who have lived in the city of Vientiane for five years or more before they turned twenty-five years of age, with the responses of those who had not. Appendix H is a sample of the questionnaire that I used, with English translation added. It will be noted that the questionnaire refers to *suukhwan* rituals rather than *khwan* rituals. This is because in everyday language usage these rituals are referred to as *suukhwan* or *baasii* rituals.

Appendix I provides short summaries of several Lao creation myths. The summaries speak to issues of Lao assumptions regarding causality and origin. Reading them alongside the discussion in Chapter 7 regarding the worldview assumptions that Lao

bring to reading the Bible may be helpful. Appendix J provides a look at the Lao metaphysical view of the Buddhist cosmos.

Appendices K through M are photos of some of the key elements in *khwan* ritual. Appendix K shows a *mawphawn* calling the *khwan* at a wedding *khwan* ritual. Appendix L shows the *tonbaasii* at another wedding *khwan* ritual. Appendix M is a picture of family and friends tying the *khwan* to an elder in their community who they have honored by calling his *khwan* at Lao New Year. As can be seen in this photograph, the *phaakhwan* consists of meat gifts, and the *tonbaasii* is missing

APPENDIX A

RESPONDENT'S PROFILE

APPEARS AT THE END OF THIS FILE ALONG WITH OTHER HORIZONTAL TABLES

APPENDIX B

Emic Meaning Of *Khwan* And *Khwan* Rituals For Sixty Respondents

APPEARS AT THE END OF THIS FILE ALONG WITH OTHER HORIZONTAL TABLES

APPENDIX C

KHWAN RITUAL OCCASIONS IDENTIFIED BY RESPONDENTS

APPEARS AT THE END OF THIS FILE ALONG WITH OTHER HORIZONTAL TABLES

APPENDIX D

KHWAN RITUALS IDENTIFIED BY RESPONDENTS

APPEARS AT THE END OF THIS FILE ALONG WITH
OTHER HORIZONTAL TABLES

APPENDIX E

URBAN-RURAL PROFILE COMPARISONS

APPEARS AT THE END OF THIS FILE ALONG WITH OTHER HORIZONTAL TABLES

APPENDIX F

URBAN-RURAL COMPARISON OF EMIC MEANINGS

**APPEARS AT THE END OF THIS FILE ALONG WITH
OTHER HORIZONTAL TABLES**

APPENDIX G

**URBAN-RURAL COMPARISON OF IDENTIFIED
RITUALS**

**APPEARS AT THE END OF THIS FILE ALONG WITH
OTHER HORIZONTAL TABLES**

APPENDIX H

**QUESTIONNAIRE REGARDING *SUUKHWAN* RITUALS
AND *KHWAN***

£¿-«¾´-¡È¼¸-¡ñ®-Àì^º¤-²ò-êó-¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--Áì½-¢¸ñ-

¸ñ--êó___/____/00   §¾¨ / ¨ò¤
Date   Male/Female

1. ¢ð-Ã¹É-êÈ¾--®Ò-¢¼--§^-¢º¤-êÈ¾-- ¨É°--¸È¾-µ¾¡-¥½-Ã¹É-êÈ¾--´ó-£¾´-¡½-®¾¨-Ã¥-Ã--¡¾--ª°-®-£¿-«¾´-µøÈ-ì÷È´-š
Please do not write your name so that you will feel at ease in answering the questions below.

2. êÈ¾--º½-¨ñ¡-¯ó   êÈ¾-À¡ó©-µøÈ-Á¢¸¤-
Ã©_____êÈ¾--Ä©É-µøÈ-¡-Á²¤--½-£º--¼¤-¥ñ--¥ñ¡-¯ó-
ÁìÉ¸____µøÈ-¸¼¤-¥ñ--ó-ê¿-°ò©-êÈ¾--º½-¨ñ¡-¯ó-ÁìÉ¸____êÈ¾--
À¯ñ-§ö--À°‰¾-Ã©
ì¾-ì÷È´ / ì¾-¡¾¤ / ì¾-¦ø¤.
Age____ Province born in_____How many years have you lived in the Municipality of Vientiane?_____ How old were you when you first lived in the Mun. of Vientiane?_____ What ethnic group do you belong to?
Lowland Lao, Midland Lao, Highland Lao.

3. êÈ¾--À§^º-«õ¦¾©-¡½-Î¾Ã©_____ (²÷© £-ëò-¦-ª-¼- °ó °^-Å)
What religion do you adhere to?_____(Buddhism, Christian, Phii, Other)

4. êÈ¾--Ä©É-¡ò¡-¦¾--»º©-§~--Ã©ÁìÉ¸_____(¯½-«ö´ ´ñ©-«½-¨ö´ °ø-©ö´ ´½-¬½-¸ò-ê½-¨¾Äì)
What level of education do you have?___ (Primary, Middle School, High School, College)

5.   êÈ¾-- º'È¾--²¾-¦¾-Äê-À¯ñ--®Ò_____êÈ¾--¢¼--²¾-¦¾-Äê-À¯ñ--®Ò_____
Are you able to read Thai?_____ Are you able to write in Thai?_____

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6. êÈ¾--£ô©-¸È¾-£¸¾´-À§ˆ°-«õ-À«ò¤-¢¸ñ--À¯ñ--¦…¤-¦¿-£ñ--¦¿-ìñ®-£ö--ì¾¸-®Ò

Do you think that the belief in *khwan* is important for Lao people?

-êÈ¾--£ò©-¸È¾-¢¸ñ--À¯ñ--¦…¤-¦¿-£ñ-   (Íõ®Ò-¦¿-£ñ-)-¦¿-ìñ®-£ö--ì¾¸À¯ñ--¹¨ñ¤

Why do you feel this way?

7. êÈ¾--À§ˆ°-¸È¾-êÈ¾--´ó-¢¸ñ--®Ò_____

Do you believe in *khwan*?_____

êÈ¾--À£ó¨-»øÉ-¦ô¡¸È¾-¢¸ñ--¢°¤-êÈ¾--Îó-¥¾¡-êÈ¾--®Ò   À£ó¨   ®Ò-À£ó¨
«É¾-êÈ¾--À£ó¨-Ä©É-ëøÉ-¦ô¡¸È¾-¢¸ñ--¢°¤-êÈ¾--Ä©É-Îó-¥¾¡-Âª   êÈ¾--Ä©É-À»ñ©-¹¨ñ¤-Ã¹É-¢¸ñ--¡ñ®-´¾

Have you ever felt that your *khwan* left you? Have____Have not____

If you have felt that your *khwan* has left you, what did you do to make your *khwan* return?

8. êÈ¾-£ò©-¸È¾-¢¸ñ--Á´È--¹¨ñ¤

What do you think *khwan* is?

¢¸ñ--¡ñ®-¸ò--¨¾-ªÈ¾¤-¡ñ--®Ò   «É¾-êÈ¾-£ò©-¸È¾-¢¸ñ--¡ñ®-¸ò--¨¾-ªÈ¾¤-¢ð-Ã¹É-êÈ¾-°½-êò®-®¾¨-¸È¾-´ñ--ªÈ¾¤-¡ñ--Á-¸-Ã©

Are *khwan* and *vinnyaan* different? If so explain how they are different.

9.   êÈ¾-£ò©-¸È¾-²ò-êó-¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--À¯ñ--¦…¤-¦¿-£ñ--¦¿-ìñ®-£ö--ì¾¸-®Ò_____À¯ñ--¹¨ñ¤

Do you think that *suukhwan* rituals are important for Lao people?_____Why?

10. êÈ¾-£ò©-¸È¾-²ò-êó-¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--´ó-£¾´-Ì¾¨-¹¨ñ¤

What do you think the meaning of *suukhwan* rituals is?

11.   À´ˆ°-À¸¾-²†--É°¤-Ä©É-¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--Ã¹É-êÈ¾--À°¤-êÈ¾--»øÉ-¦ò¡-Á-¸-Ã©   Íõ-«É¾-²†--É°¤-®Ò-À£ó¨-¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--Ã¹É-êÈ¾--Ã¹É-êÈ¾--ö´-÷©-¸È¾-²†--É°¤-Ä©É-¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--Ã¹É-êÈ¾--ÁíÉ-êÈ¾-£ò©-¸È¾-êÈ¾--¥½-»øÉ-¦ô¡-Á-¸-Ã©

When your relatives hold a *suukhwan* for you how do you feel? Or if they have never held a *suukhwan* ritual for you how do you suppose you would feel?

12.   ª¾´-êÈ¾--»øÉ-Áì½-À¢í¾-Ã¥-²ò-êó-¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--´ó-¥ñ¡¯½-À²©_____´ó-¯½-À²©-Ã©   ¢ð-Ã¹É-êÈ¾-¢¨--Áì½-°½-êò®-®¾¨-Á¸È-ì½-¯½-À²©-¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--µøÈ-ì÷È-š.

According to your understanding how many kinds of *suukhwan* rituals are there?_____What are the kinds? Please write a description of each kind of *suukhwan* below.

13. ²ó-êó-¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--Áì½-®¾-²ó-ª¾-êÈ¾¤-¡ñ--Á-¸-Ã©

How are *suukhwan* rituals and baasii rituals different?

14. ²ó-êó-¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--Áì½-®-¾-¦ó-£õ¡ñ--Á-¸-Ã©

How are *suukhwan* and baasii rituals the same?

15. ¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--Ã¹É-£ö--À¥ñ®-Íõ-Â§¡-®Ò-©ó-ªÈ¾¤-¡ñ--¡ñ®-¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--ùÉ-°øÉ-À«í¾-¸ñ--¯ó-ÃÏÈ-ªÈ¾¤-¡ñ--Íõ-®Ò-ªÈ¾¤-¡ñ--Á-¸-Ã©

How are *suukhwan* rituals for the ill or for a person having bad luck different from *suukhwan* rituals for an elder at New Year's and how are they the same?

16. ²†--Éº£ö--ì¾´ñ¡-Ã§É-À¢¾-ªº¡-Áª-Ã--²ò-êó-Ã©

When do Lao people like to use puffed rice in rituals?

17. Ã--²ò-êó-¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--²…--Éº£ö--ì¾-¸ñ¡-Ã§É-À¢¾-½-À²-Ã©- (À¢¾-©ò® À¢¾-¦÷¡ À¢¾-ªº¡-Áª¡)

In *suukhwan* rituals what kind of rice do Lao like to use? (uncooked rice, cooked rice, puffed rice)

18. ª¾-êÈ¾-À¢¾-Á¡¾-çÉ-À¢¾-ªº¡-Áª¡-Ã--²ò-êó-´ó-£¾-Ï¾-¨¨ñ¤

According to your understanding what is the meaning of the use of puffed rice in a ritual?

19. ²ò-ê†-»¼¡-¢¸ñ--´ó-£¾-Ï¾-¨¨ñ¤ £ö--ì¾-¸ñ¡-À»ñ©-²ò-êó--š-Ã--¡ðì½--ó-Ã©

What is the meaning of *hiakkhwan* rituals? When do Lao like to perform this ritual?

20. êȾ--À£ó¨-À¢ö-»È¸-Ã--²ò-êó-»¼¡-¢¸ñ--®Ò ¥ñ¡-Àê˜º µøÈ-À¢¸¤-í¨ñ¤

Have you ever been part of a *hiakkhwan* ritual?___How many times?_____ In what province?_____

21. ¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--À¢¾-Àì¾Á´È--í¨ñ¤ À£ó¨-À¢ö-»È¸-¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--À¢¾-Àì¾®Ò µøÈ-À¢¸¤-í¨ñ¤

What is the *suukhwan khaolao* ritual?_____ Have you ever been part of this ritual?___In which province?_____

22. ¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--Í¤-ÁÈ--í¨ñ¤ À£ó¨-À¢ö-»È¸-¦øÈ-¢¸ñ--Í¤-®Ò µøÈ-À¢¸¤-í¨ñ¤

What is a *suukhwan luang* ritual?_____Have you been part of this ritual?_____ In what province?_____

APPENDIX I

LAO CREATION MYTHS: SUMMARIES

Lao Creation Stories: Version 1

The Flood

At one time there was the ruler of Heaven *Phanya Thääng* (²½-¨¾-Á«¤) and the three chiefs, who governed a very uncivilized world. The names of these three were *Khun Khet, Khun Kan* and *Khun Puu Laan Xong* (the three *Khuns*). *Phanya Thääng* destroyed the earth with a flood because of the evil that people did. But the three chiefs escaped destruction by building a floating house.

The Pumpkins

When the three chiefs returned from the heavenly city of *Phanya Thääng* to the world after the flood, *Phanya Thääng* gave them a buffalo, which eventually died, and out of its nostrils grew a creeping vine that grew a great pumpkin. Out of the pumpkin came people: first the *Kha* (the midland Lao, who are darker in complexion), and then the Lao (lighter in complexion because by now, the hole in the pumpkin was wider).

Khun Buulom

Khun Buulom was the son of *Phanya Thääng* and the first king of the Lao. He asked the ancestral father and mother *Puu Thao Yüe* and *Mää Yaa Ngaam* to cut down the

creeper that had grown so high that it covered the sky and cut out sunlight. [1] The creeper fell on them and killed them. Since that time, Lao always pay respect to them by invoking their names before they eat and before they begin a new task (Berval 1959).

<div align="center">**Lao Creation Stories: Version 2**</div>

The Story of the Flood

A long time ago there was a great flood caused by a fight between the god of thunder *Saang Loo Khoo* and the god of the storm *Luei Kang*. A bird warned *Phuu Hay* and his younger sister *Phuu Hay Muei*, and they were able to climb on top of a giant pumpkin to escape the flood. Finally, the pumpkin came to rest on a mountain. The brother and sister began a search for other survivors in order to find a suitable wife and husband for each of them. They met a turtle who told them that there were no other survivors, and in his anger *Phuu Hay* cut the turtle into pieces. But it was able to grow back together. (However, even today, the divisions of its shell can be seen.) Then they met a bamboo grove who told them there were no survivors, and in his anger *Phuu Hay* cut the bamboo into pieces. (When it came back together it too showed the marks of the divisions on its body, as it does to this day.) Finally they realized that they were the only survivors, and understood that it was necessary for them to be the parents of future generations. When *Phuu Hay Muei* became pregnant she gave birth to a pumpkin and *Phuu Hay* opened it to see what was inside. Out came all the different peoples that inhabit the world today.

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[1] *Puu Thao Yüe* and *Mää Yaa Ngaam* are essentially the same characters as *Puu Yüe* and *Yaa Yüe* in the second version of stories.

The Story of Puu Yüe and Yaa Yüe (¯ø-À¨ó ¨È¾-À¨ó)

A long time ago there was a kingdom (À´õº¤) called *Thään* (À´õº¤-Á«-) and a giant vine grew up near *Tu* Lake. It grew so tall and high that it reached the heavens and blocked out the sunlight and the warmth that the sun gave the earth. [2] People had to carry on their lives in the dark and cold. One day King *Khun Buulom* called the [wise elders] to a meeting in order to discuss the situation. "How can we cut the vine down?" he asked. But no one was brave enough to do it. Later, an elderly couple addressed the King, "We are *Puu Yüe* and *Yaa Yüe*, and we are ready to cut down the vine." The King congratulated the two respected elderly ones and recognized their sacrifice for the nation. Before the two left they requested that if they died that the people would never forget them, and the King agreed. After that the two set themselves to the task and went to *Tu* Lake, where the vine was, taking along a large axe. It took them working all day and night for three months and three days to cut the vine down. When they finally succeeded in cutting the vine down, it regrettably fell on them and they both died instantly. In the end the sunlight returned to the earth again, bringing with it warmth to all human, plant, and animal life. King *Khun Buulom* and all his officials established a funeral ceremony for *Pu Yer* and *Ya Yer* to give them honor. Since that time until this, in order to remember the exceptional goodness of *Pu Yer* and *Ya Yer* we Lao like to put a final word on the end of a sentence to give it special significance. For example, we say, "Let's go, *Yüe*!" or "Let's go back, *Yüe*!" or "Come here, *Yüe*!" (Ä¯-À¨ó, À´õº-À¨ó, ¾-À¨ó see *Lao Traditional Folktales* c.1996).

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[2] In societies where there is a myth regarding an obstacle between earth and heaven which has to be removed by a hero, the myth is generally reflecting an oppressive hierarchy in the society. These stories may be a polemic against the gods who impose something too heavy upon human life.

Lao Creation Stories: Summary Notes from Other Versions

It is worth noting that some stories describe *Khun Buulom* as a person who descended to earth from *Müang Thään* (the Heavenly city, see Sahai 1996:54), where his father is *Phii Thään* (the sky god). Other stories say that *Khun Buulom*'s father is *Indra*. The belief in *Müang Thään* and *Phii Thään* are more ancient *Tai* beliefs that originated in southern China (Sahai 1996).[3] These two accounts of *Khun Buulom* probably reflect the influence of Brahmanism and Buddhism on an older Lao (*Tai*) belief about creation. *Indra* has simply become *Phii Thään*.[4]

In the first series of creation stories, *Khun Buulom* comes down from heaven as the son of the sky god. The ancestral couple is understood to be the first couple after the flood. No explanation is given for the existence of people before the flood. The people were ruled by three kings who escaped the flood on a boat that took them to the heavenly city of *Müang Thääng*. But in the second series of stories, there is a new ancestral couple (*Phuu Hay* and his sister *Phuu Hay Muei*), and again there is no explanation for the origin of the people who preceded the flood. *Khun Buulom* is now an earthly king, and the couple *Puu Yüe* and *Yaa Yüe* are a respected elderly couple not the original ancestors.

In Lao cosmology, humans and spiritual beings frequently move between levels of existence in heaven, earth, and hell (see Appendix J for details on the levels of existence). In the story of the *Ramayanna*, heavenly beings (from many different levels

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[3] See Richard Pottier's doctoral thesis "Les System de Sante Lao et Ses Possibilities de Developments" (1979 :787-788).

[4] Further study needs to be done on the belief in *Phii Thään* to see if there are any benefits in associating the God of the Bible with this ancient belief. The word used now in the church for God *Phrachao* (²½-À¥í¾) is more closely translated as "lord" making it possible to miss the ultimate claim for God
in the Bible.

of heaven) regularly enter into the drama of human life. In fact, the entire epic of the Ramayanna may be seen from the perspective of heaven settling its scores on the stage of human existence. Earthly human existence is the center stage of all Lao myth, since the gods, spirits, and humans make *karma* while on earth.

APPENDIX J

LEVELS OF EXISTENCE IN THE LAO BUDDHIST COSMOLOGY
(Adapted from Tambiah 1970:36ff)

ARUPA LOKA
Four levels of heaven
No form, no sensual awareness, no desire
The realm of the Buddha

RUPA LOKA
Sixteen levels of heaven
Form exists but there is no sensual awareness, only intellectual enjoyment.

KAMA LOKA
Six levels of heaven and five levels of world existence
There is form and there is sensual enjoyment thus suffering.
Level six heaven (*Tusita*): Realm of the Buddhahaisttvas and Arahats

---

Levels 3-5 Heaven

Level 2 Heaven: Realm of the God *Indra*

Level 1 Heaven: Realm of the four guardian spirits

Level 1 World: Realm of the spirits, angels, *Naang Thawranii* (Earth Goddess)

Level 2 World: Realm of humans (where *karma* is made)

Level 3 World: Realm of animals

Level 4 World: Realm of ghosts

Level 5 World: Realm of souls in hell (eight levels of hell follow this one)

APPENDIX K

A *MAWPHAWN* CALLS THE *KHWAN*
(Photograph By Author)

APPENDIX L

TONBAASII ON THE *PHAAKHWAN*
(Photograph by Author)

APPENDIX M

STRINGS OF BLESSING TIE THE *KHWAN*
(Photograph By Author)

GLOSSARY OF FREQUENTLY-USED LAO WORDS

ai nawng   Refers to biological and fictive kin relationships that are structured as a patron/client model

baan   A village or small town

baasii   A cover term for *khwan* rituals, or may be used to refer to a *khwan* ritual of blessing

bunkhun   Moral virtue of selfless giving to others, associated with mothers and monks

khaathaa   An often secret phrase that, when spoken, empowers a person or an object for protection or in order to influence people or events in favor of the one on whose behalf they were spoken

khun   See *bunkhun* above, *bun* refers to merit in the Buddhist sense; *khun* refers to the moral attribute associated with merit

khwaamsuk   Total happiness; contentment that results from having enough to meet one's physical needs; it implies having meaningful relationships and freedom from worry

maakpāng   The offerings on the *phaakhwan* tray given to beg forgiveness of the ancestor spirits and to attract the *khwan*

mawphawn   The ritual specialist who performs most *khwan* rituals

müang   (1) a district area in the administrative organization of the Lao government; (2) an old name for an area that was once organized under one lord in order to manage an irrigation system that served multiple villages; (3) the nation of the Lao PDR, (4) a reference to powers outside and larger than the village; (5) in the section that reviews R. B. Davis' description of Lao cosmology the word *müang* refers to the Northern Thai people that he was studying; (6) in this dissertation it is often used in a technical sense to refer to

the feelings of Lao people toward powers that are larger than and located outside of the village; this word is used in a popular way with much the same meaning

phaakhwan   A round rattan and bamboo woven tray that is about eight inches high, used to serve the family meals on in a Lao home

phii   A spirit, a ghost, a spirit of the ancestors

singsaksit   A non human supernatural power, the spirit of a powerful (morally, politically, and/or spiritually) person or amoral force

tonbaasii   A structure built on the *phaakhwan* that symbolizes the center of the Buddhist universe, Mount Meru; cotton string used to tie the *khwan* to the ritual recipient is draped on the *phaakhwan*

vinnyaan   A Buddhist Pali word for consciousness; in popular usage among the Lao, refers to the spirit of a person that will leave the body only at death

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VITA

Stephen K. Bailey was born the fourth of seven children in Brockton, Massachusetts to Dr. Richard W. Bailey and Helen E. Bailey on July 15, 1959. His father was a minister in the Christian and Missionary Alliance for more than forty years. Dr. Richard W. Bailey served as a pastor, District Superintendent, and the National Vice President of Church Ministries. He was chairman of the Board of Managers when he died on January 3, 2000. His mother faithfully served along his through their ministry. She is retired and living in Fort Myers, Florida.

Stephen graduated from Wheaton College with a B.A. in Biblical Studies in 1981. He then served with CAMA Services from 1981 to 1982 in a Lao refugee camp in northeast Thailand. From 1982 to 1985 he attended Alliance Theological Seminary and earned the M.Div. Degree while majoring in missions. During his first year there he met Jacqui. They were married one year later in August 1983. Jacqui is a graduate of Columbia Presbyterian School of Nursing and the youngest person to have ever been honored by this school as Alumnus of the Year for her work with Hmong opium addicts from 1985 to 1987 in Ban Vanai Refugee camp in Thailand.

Stephen and Jacqui served together under CAMA Services in refugee camps from 1985 to 1989. In 1989 they lived in Nong Khai in northeast Thailand and worked in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. In 1990 they moved to the Lao PDR and lived there until 1996. They then spent a year in Pasadena, California while Stephen studied at Fuller Theological Seminary and served as pastor of the Alliance Church in Santa Monica. He completed his M.Th. degree in Intercultural Studies in 1998. Stephen and his family returned to the Lao PDR in 1997 and served there until June, 2001. He then accepted a position as the Director of the Alliance Graduate School of Mission and Assistant Professor of Missiology at Alliance Theological Seminary in Nyack, New York. From 1999 to 2002 Stephen pursued and completed his Ph.D. in Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary.

He continues to serve at Alliance Theological Seminary, on the Advisory Board of CAMA Services, and is a Senior Associate of the Institute for Global Engagement. Stephen and Jacqui have four children, Katelyn, Karyn, Richard and Heather.

TABLE 15

MORALITY AND POWER IN THE THAI/LAO WORLDVIEW
(Adapted from Mulder 1979:123)

| | *Khuna* (moral goodness) | | Meditation | *Decha or Lit* (power) | |
	A	B	C	D	E
Order	Beyond human order	Order of goodness	Order of community	Tenuous order	Chaos
Symbol	Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha	The mother, parents, teacher	The "good leader," father: good and powerful	Saksit powers, spirits and theevada	Bad spirits (death)
Quality	Pure virtue, pure compassion, wisdom; certainty	Moral goodness, pure Bunkhun, reliability, forgiveness	Safety and mutuality	Ambiguous: potentially, protective, benevolent yet jealous and amoral	Entirely dangerous, whimsical, threatening, immoral
Reliability	Certainty	Stability	Stability defended	Instability	Capriciousness
Time perspective	Cycle of rebirth	Continuity	Life-long	Short time	Immediate
Religious Complex	Doctrinal Buddhism, eight-fold path, teaching, meditating, temple, and monks	To honor parents, elders and teachers	Brahman ritual, ancestor cult, *khwan* rituals, civic rituals	Animistic ritual including monks who empower amulets and give lotto numbers	Magic, mobilizing *saksit* power, death rituals to trick spirits.
Spiritual Beings	Buddha	Rice and Earth goddesses	Ancestors, k*hwan*	Guardian spirits, Buddha	Evil spirits
Aim	Salvation; better rebirth	Moral continuity, identity, fertility	Auspiciousness, continuity, safety, peace	To ensure protection; good fortune	To ward off danger
Means	Make merit as a moral pursuit	To acknowledge *khun,* to be grateful/return the favor, agricultural ritual	To be dependable, be a reliable member of group/respect tradition	To show respect; to redeem the vow; to make merit as a protective measure	Protective amulets, *khaathaa*, etc., Powerful magic, make merit for the deceased
Infraction	Sin; activates karmic retribution; feelings of guilt / Stupidity; Social sanctions; loss of face			activates revenge / activates danger	
Direction	Ultimate refuge	Ego receives first	Ego	Ego gives respect first	Ego is extorted
Domesticated Area of Existence					

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TABLE 21

KHWAN RITUAL PROCESS DOMAINS

Ritual Phases	OBJECTS			COMMUNITY PARTICIPANTS				
	Phaa khwan	Cotton Strings	*Mawphawn* Ritual Words	*Khwan*	Recipient	Spiritual Beings	*Mawphawn* Elders	Family/Friends
Structured Phase Pre-Ritual	Family meal table Table for *somma* (forgiveness) offerings to elders and ancestors (*phii*)	White Cotton used to make clothes, transfer merit from monks to the living and to the ancestors (*phii*)	*Pali* or poetic auspicious phrases	Present/not-present Life-spirit/morale, health Kind of *vinnyaan Kumlangchay*	Member of community who has had a New success or blessing, or is Ill, or anxious about new venture, or depressed	Buddha, Hindu gods, angels, guardian spirits, ancestor spirits	Household or community, former monk/has merit, speaks well, knows some sacred Pali and poetic *khwan* chants	The community calls for and hosts the ritual. Members are: • Seniors, Juniors • Father, Mother • Elders who represent accumulated merit (power) and ritual knowledge
Structured Phase Ritual	*Phaakhwan* with offerings to attract *khwan* (and *phii*)	Placed on *Tdonbasi* on *Phaakhwan* by women	Poetic narrative of the situation	In need of strengthening Lost or gone to play	In need of luck, health, encouragement, affirmation, etc.	Buddha, Hindu gods, angels guardian spirits, ancestor spirits	Represents community, instructs preparations, receives payment, then his wrists are tied first to strengthen him for the task	Help prepare ritual items and meal, participates in holding cotton string during the chanting and touching the *phaakhwan* when it is offered to recipient
Un-structured Phase Calling the *Khwan*	*Khwan* comes to the table and offerings are presented to *khwan* to feast on.	Tied around wrist of recipient by *Mawphawn*, then by all to attach the *khwan* to recipient	Poetic blessing	Called to the ritual then invited to feast on the *Phaakhwan* offerings	Liminal Stage Strengthen, recovers *khwan* with help of community, ritual words and actions of *mawphawn*	Buddha, Hindu gods, angels, guardian spirits, ancestor spirits, *Khwan*	Invites, calls, instructs and attaches *khwan* to recipient. Presents the *phaakhwan* to the recipient	Communitas experience peaks with common call for the return of the recipient's *khwan*. Attach the *khwan* with string and encourage recipient with words of blessing
Structured Phase Post-Ritual	Meal table for community	String is left on the wrist for several days to ensure presence of the *khwan*	Conversation and jokes with congregation	Tied or connected to the person/owner	Honored and loved by the community that feasts her.	Buddha, Hindu gods, angels guardian spirits, ancestor spirits, *Khwan*	Feasted with a choice piece of meat (chicken or pork)	Honor the recipient with their presence at the feast

TABLE 23A

LAO RELIGIOUS RITUAL SYSTEM

| Time of Ritual	Power Source	Buddha *Dharma* Monks	*Khwan*	Ancestors	*PhiiTaahääk*	*Nang Toranii*	*Phayanaak & Ubakhit*
	Location	Sacred *Pali* Words	*Phaakhwan*	Obligation to Elders	Rice	Earth	Water Source
	Ritual Specialist	Monks	*Mawphawn*	Household	Farmer	Ego	*Chao Cham*
	Occasion	**Ritual Name**	**Ritual Name**	**Ritual Name**	**Ritual Name**	**Ritual Name**	**Ritual Name**
Lunar Month/Waning/Waxing Moon — 1st Month	*Bun KhaoKum*	*YaadNam*					Invite *Ubakhit*
2nd Month	*Bun Khunlaan*	*Suukhwan* Khao	*YaadNam*				
3rd Month	*Bun Khaochii/Bun Makabusa*		*YaadNam*				
4th Month	*Bun Phavaat*		*YaadNam*				
5th Month	*Bun Songkaan*	*Baasii*	*YaadNam*				
6th Month	*Bun Bang Fai / Bun Visaka*		*YaadNam*				
7th Month	*Bun Sumla*		*YaadNam*				
8th Month	*Bun Khaophansa*		*YaadNam*				
9th Month	*Bun Khaopadapdin*		*YaadNam*				
10th Month	*Bun Khaosalaak Sutkhwan*	*Suukhwan* Khao	*YaadNam*	*Liang Phii*			
11th Month	*Bun Awkphansa*		*YaadNam*				
12th Month	*BunKathin*		*YaadNam*				
Auspicious Days — Birth 1st Child		*Suukhwan Awk Kam*	*Somma*				
Monkhood	*Buad*	*Suukhwan Naak*					
Wedding	*Takbaat*	*Suukhwan Dong*	*Somma*				
Illness	*Sut Khwan*	*Hiak Khwan*					
Success	*Sutmon*	*Suukhwan Thammada*					
Bad Luck	*Sutmonkaekha*	*Suukhwan_Kä Khaw*					
		Suukhwan Song					
Before Travel	*Sutmon*	*Phii Nawng*			*Liang Phii*		
After Travel	*Sutmon*	*Suukhwa Tawn Hab*					
Guests		*Baasii*					
8th/15th Lunar Days — *Merit Days*	*Tak Baat*		*Yaad Nam*				
Everyday	*Tak Baat*						
As Needed — Death	*Songsakaan/KongBuad*	*Suukhwan*	*Yaad Nam*				
Enter Territory							
Worry/Future	*Counseling*						
Lottery Numbers	Monks/Offering		*Baphiii/ Kääba*		*Baphii/ Kääba*		

TABLE 23B

LAO RELIGIOUS RITUAL SYSTEM

| Time of Ritual	Power Source	Buddha *Dharma* Monks	Guardian Spirit	4 Brahman Lords	Amulets	Female Ancestor Spirits	Evil Spirits
	Location	Sacred *Pali* Words	Territory	Auspicious Directions	*Khathaa*	Ancestor Spirits	Territory
	Ritual Specialist	Monks	*Chao Cham*	*Chao Cham*	Monk	*Naang Tiam*	*Maw Yao*
	Occasion	**Ritual Name**	**Ritual Name**	**Ritual Name**	**Ritual Name**	**Ritual Name**	**Rital Name**
Lunar Month / Waning / Waxing Moon	1st Month 2nd Month 3rd Month 4th Month 5th Month 6th Month 7th Month 8th Month 9th Month 10th Month 11th Month 12th Month	*Bun KhaoKam* *Bun Khunlaan* *Bun Khaochii/Bun Makabusa* *Bun Phavaat* *Bun Songkaan* *Bun Bang Fai/Bun Visaka* *Bun Sumla* *Bun Khaophansa* *Bun Khaopadapdin* *Bun Khaosalaak Sutkhwan* *Bun Awkphansa* *BunKathin*	Good Harvest *Baphii Kääba*	Sweep Evil Out		Prediction for Harvest	
Auspicious Days	Birth 1st Child Monkhood Wedding Illness Success Bad Luck Before Travel After Travel Guests	 *Buad* *Takbaat* *Suut Khwan* *Sutmon* *Sutmonkaekha* *Sutmon* *Sutmon*	 *Baphii/Kääba* *Baphii/Kääba*	*Busaa* *Busaa* *Busaa* *Busaa* *Busaa* *Busaa* *Busaa* *Busaa* *Busaa*	Empowered by Monk	*Baphii/Kääba* *Baphii/Kääba* *Baphii/Kääba* *Baphii/Kääba* *Baphii/Kääba*	*Layphii*
8th/ 15th Lunar Days	Merit Days Everyday	*Tak Baat* *Tak Baat*					
As Needed	Death Enter Territory Worry / Future Lottery Numbers	*Songsakaan/KongBuad* Counseling Monks/Offering	 *Baphii/Kääba* *Baphii/Kääba*			 *Baphii/Kääba* *Baphii/Kääba*	*Laiphii/Exorcism*

APPENDIX A
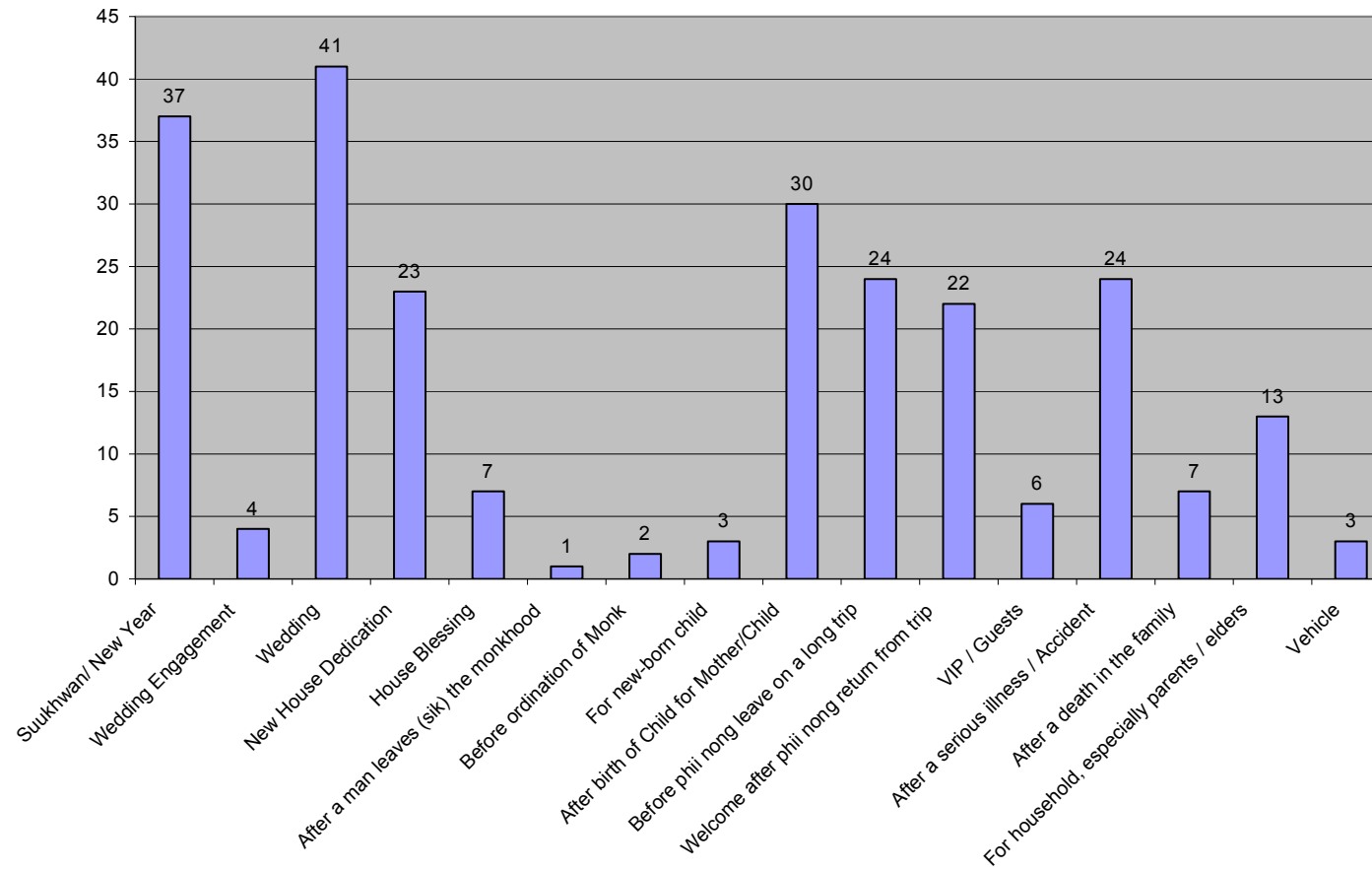
RESPONDENTS' PROFILE
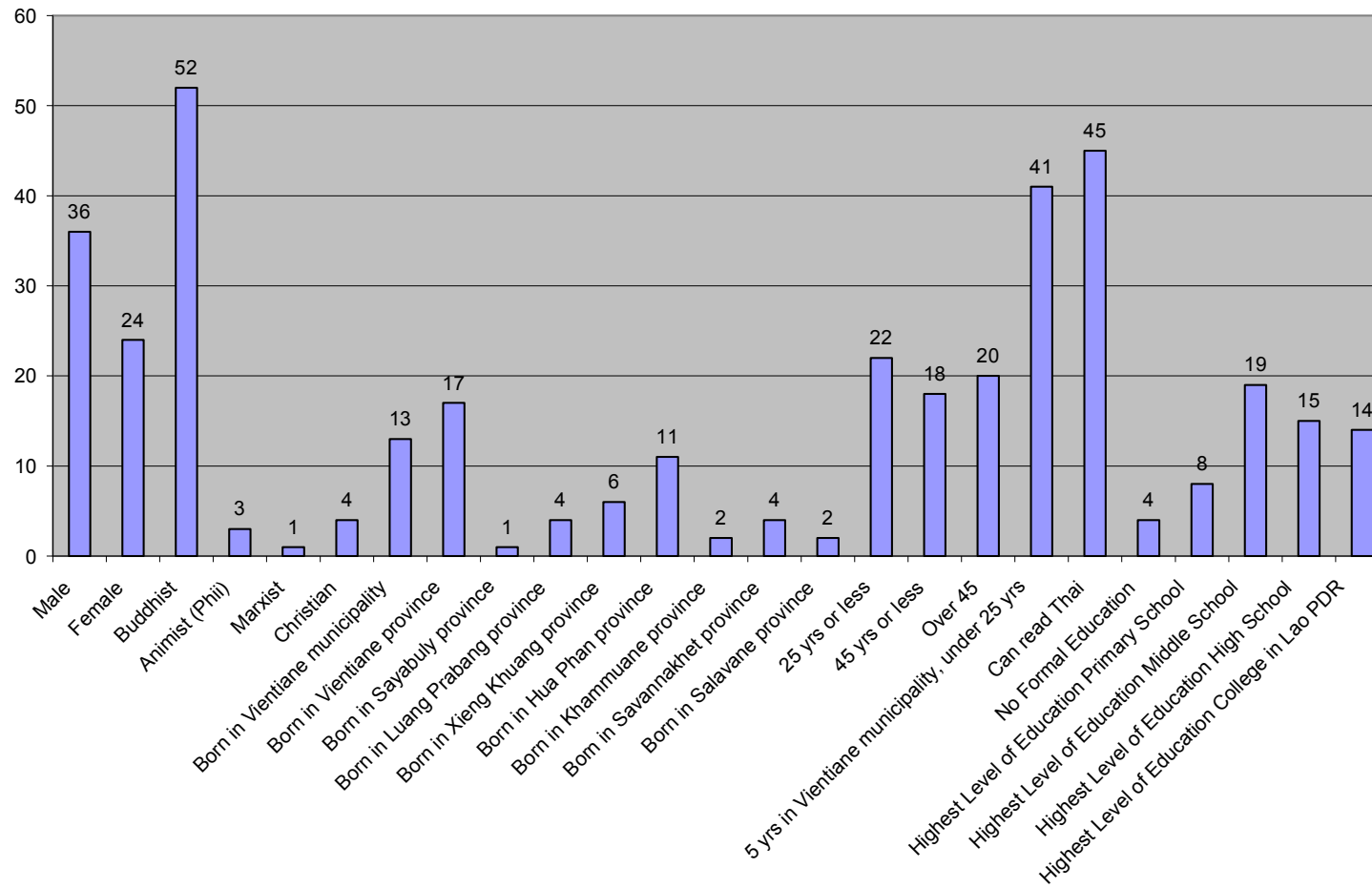
APPENDIX B

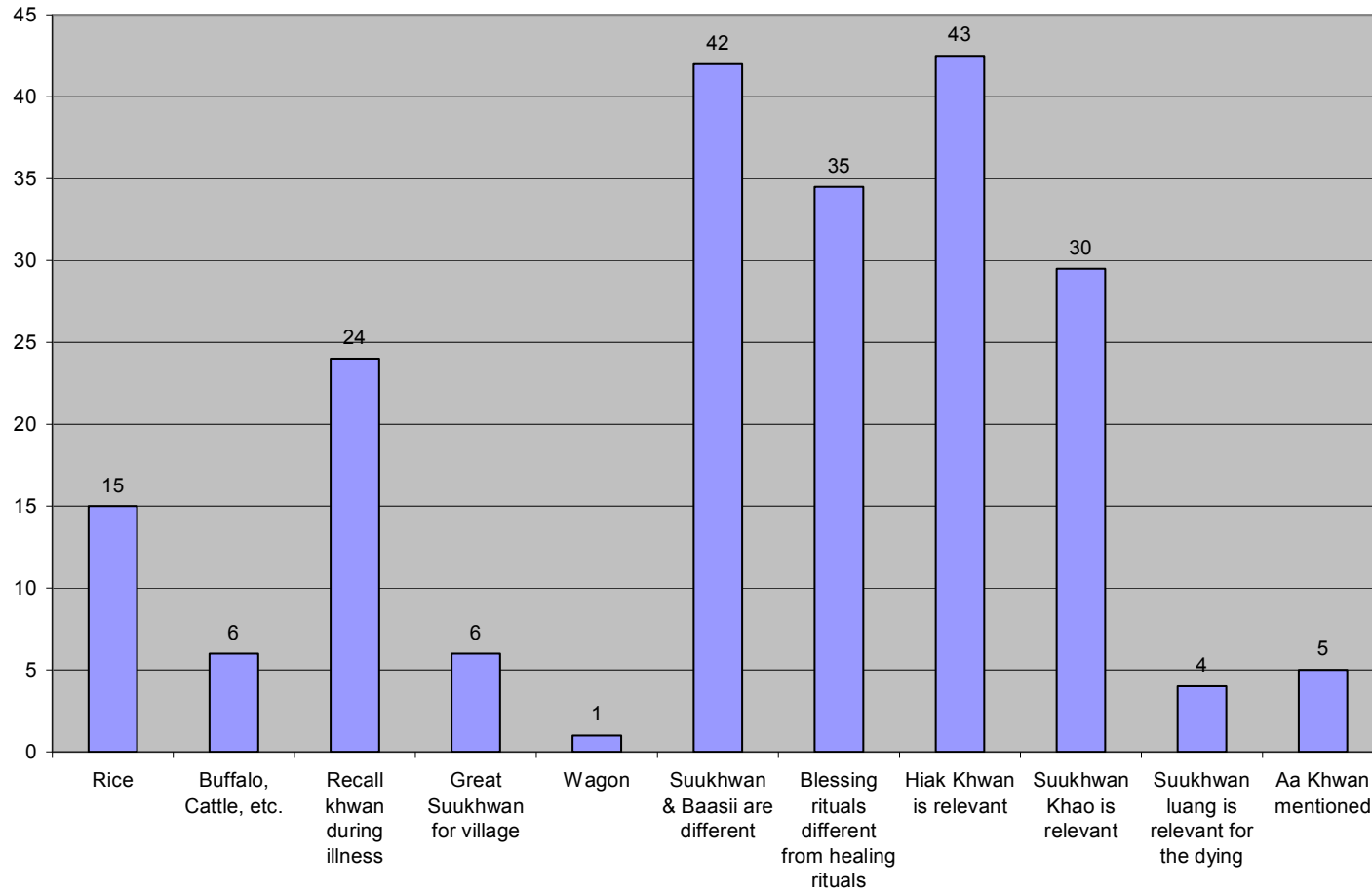## EMIC MEANING OF *KHWAN* AND *KHWAN* RITUALS
FOR SIXTY RESPONDENTS
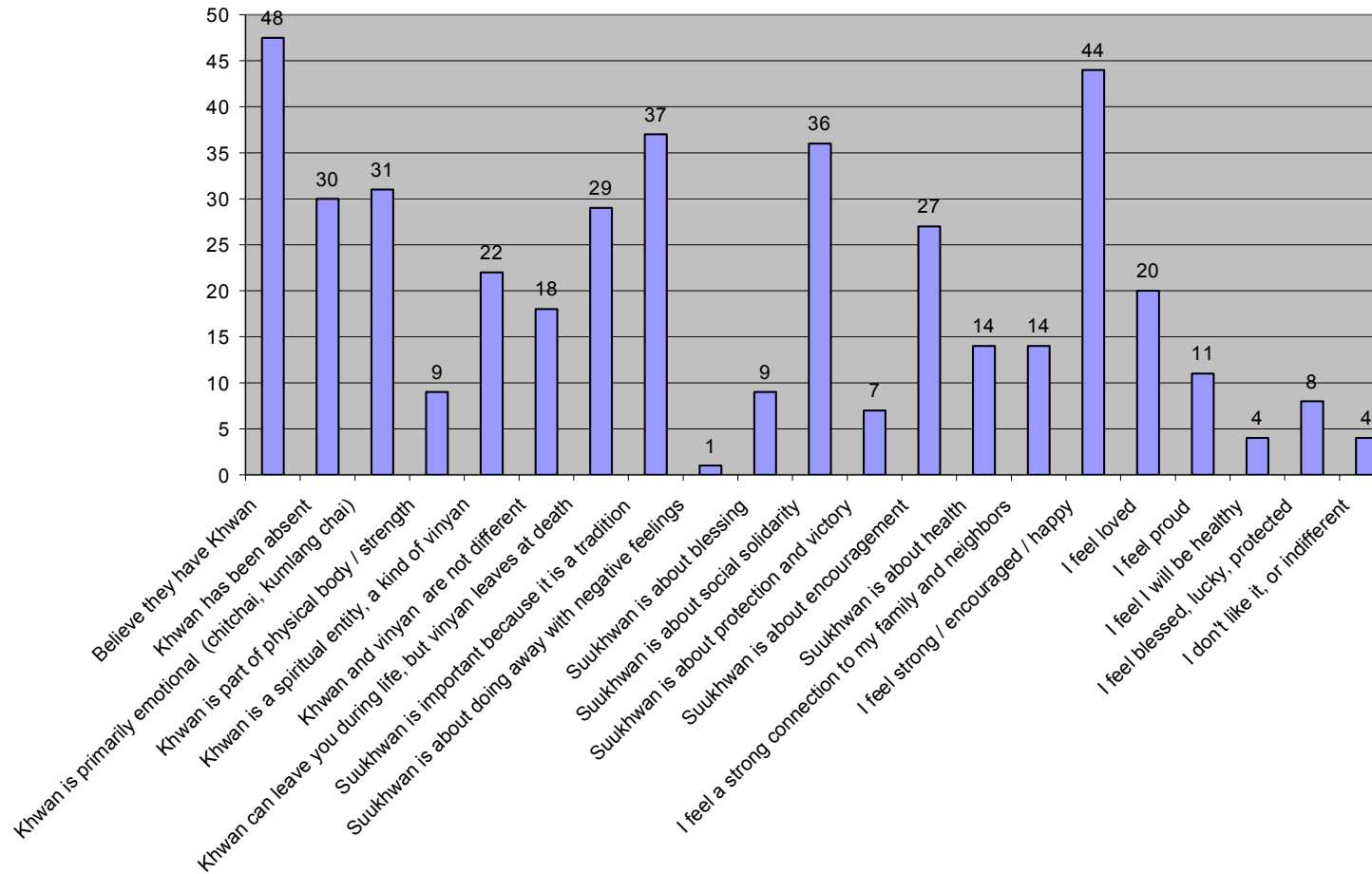
APPENDIX C

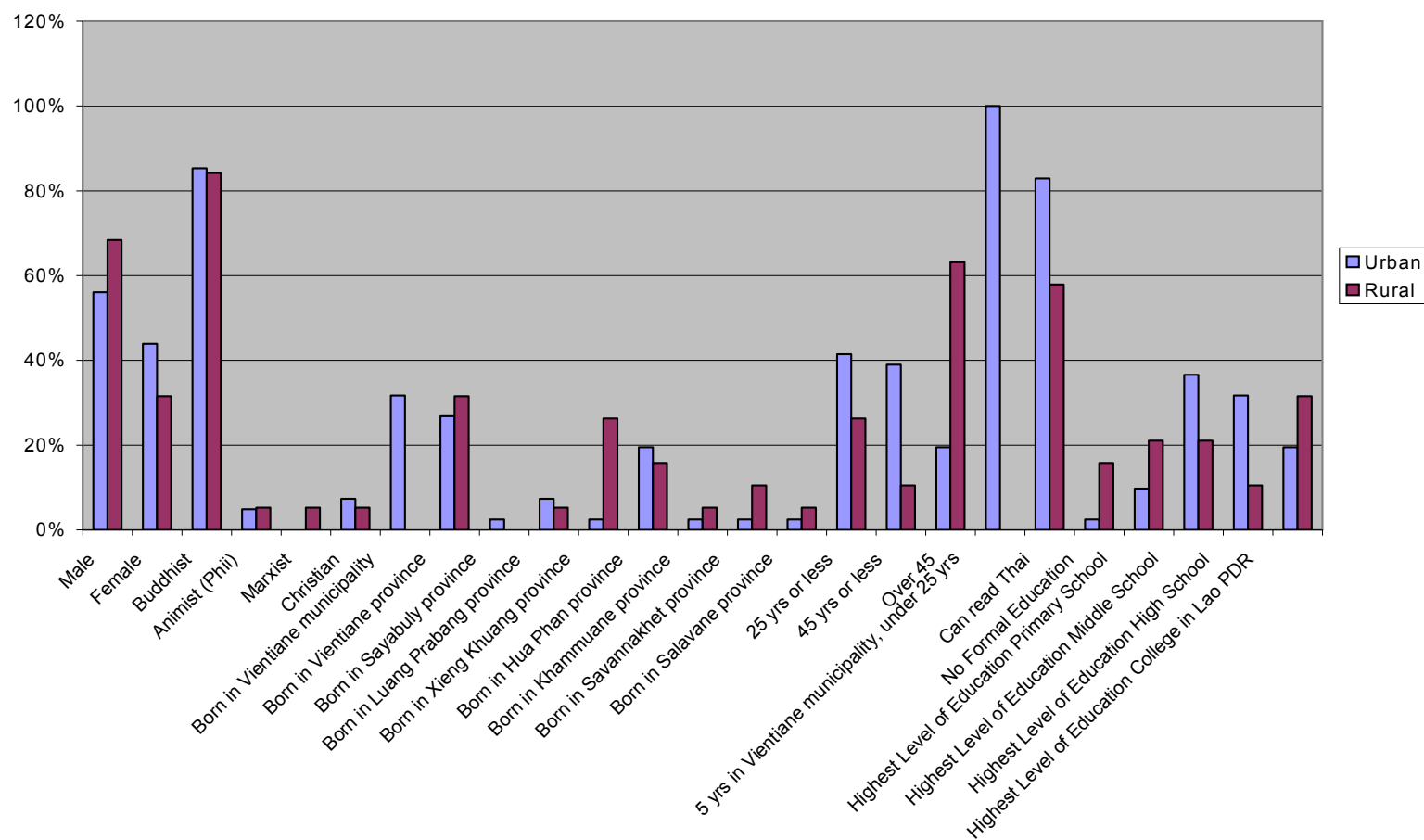## *KHWAN* RITUAL OCCASSIONS IDENTIFIED BY RESPONDENTS

APPENDIX D

KHWAN RITUALS IDENTIFIED BY RESPONDENTS

Bar chart showing KHWAN rituals identified by respondents:

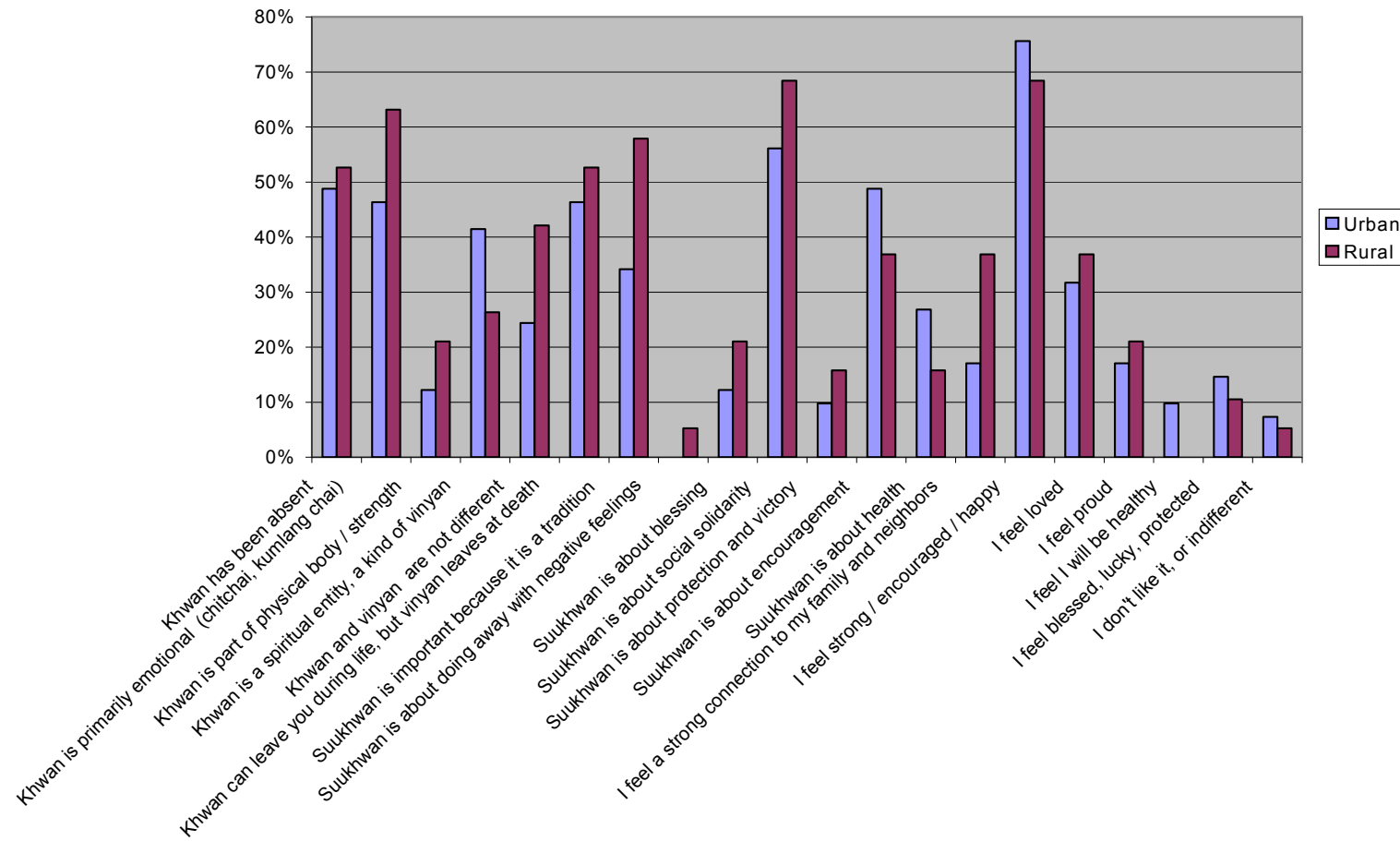| Category	Value
Rice	15
Buffalo, Cattle, etc.	6
Recall khwan during illness	24
Great Suukhwan for village	6
Wagon	1
Suukhwan & Baasii are different	42
Blessing rituals different from healing rituals	35
Hiak Khwan is relevant	43
Suukhwan Khao is relevant	30
Suukhwan luang is relevant for the dying	4
Aa Khwan mentioned	5

APPENDIX E

URBAN-RURAL PROFILE COMPARISON

APPENDIX F

URBAN-RURAL COMPARISON OF EMIC MEANING

APPENDIX G

URBAN-RURAL COMPARISON OF IDENTIFIED RITUALS